

Session IV: The Math, Myth and Management of Pet Populations

Feral Cats: Free-Roaming Cat Study

By Dr. Margaret Slater

Free-Roaming Cats and Nonsurgical Sterilization

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Outline

- How big is the problem?
- What do people think about them?
- Challenges for implementation

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Free-Roaming Cats

- Any cat not confined to an owner's house or property
 - Includes friendly and feral (unsocial) cats
 - Includes owned, loosely owned and unowned cats
 - Numbers and distribution likely vary with location
 - Climate, local laws, human density, food sources



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How many cats in the U.S.?

- Owned cats
 - 38 million households own a cat
 - 90.5 million cats owned
 - Fed cats
 - 9-13% of households feed unowned cats
 - About 3-4 cats fed per household
 - So fed unowned cats about 1/3 to 1/2 of total cat population
 - Total unowned? Total free-roaming?
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Small Texas Town Study

- 1,322 households; 28% owned cats
 - 700 owned cats (~500 allowed out)
 - 700-900 total outside cats counted
 - 13% of households fed unowned
 - Median of 2 cats, average of 3
 - 550 to 950 unowned fed cats
 - So free-roaming cats about = owned?
 - This includes owned indoor/outdoor cats
 - Unowned cats maybe 50% of total?
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Opinions About Free-Roaming Cats

- Wide variation based on complaints, anecdotes
 - From part of family to vermin
 - In small-town Texas
 - 68% saw free-roaming cats
 - 13% fed them
 - 42% thought they were a problem
 - Nuisance 42%; public health 24%; animal welfare 21%
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Trap, Neuter and Return

- One way to assess people's opinions
 - Live trap, sterilize, vaccinate and return cats to original location
 - Monitor and feed
 - Adopt young kittens and tame adults
 - Quite controversial but becoming more widely accepted
 - Some data that it is an effective population control method
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Surgical Sterilization Benefits

- Sterilization decreases fighting, roaming, noise
 - No breeding so no litters, less stress
 - No unwanted kittens
 - Overall improvement in health
 - Gain in weight after neutering
 - Caretakers often report become more sociable, improved coat quality
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IL State Law

- Feral cats not owned, caretakers doing TNR not legally owners
 - Feral cats not "owned" so not part of the usual adoption/euthanasia system
 - Caretakers eligible for new spay/neuter funding
 - Veterinarians and municipalities doing TNR exempt from liability except for willful or wanton misconduct
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Other Locations Doing TNR

- Maricopa County, AZ
 - Ithaca, NY
 - Cape May, NJ
 - Oahu, HI
 - Novato, CA
 - University campuses
 - Army Navy Country Club, VA
 - New York City
 - Philadelphia
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Challenges to Implementation

- Legal status of unowned cats
 - Varies from place to place
 - Wildlife vs. domestic animal
 - Who is responsible for them?
 - What ordinances are present and how do they affect unowned cats?
 - Controversies over TNR
 - Wildlife, public health, animal welfare
 - Based on predation, rabies, cat health
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Challenges to Implementation

- Controlling other nuisance behaviors
 - Fighting, roaming, spraying
 - Permanence of sterilization
 - Feral cats in managed colonies may live 10-17 years
 - Repeat injections not going to happen
 - Repeat topical is possible
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Challenges to Implementation

- ❑ Administering the contraceptive
 - Catching the cats
 - ❑ Traps, trained trappers, safety
 - How administered
 - ❑ Oral nice but never happen because of concern over target species only
 - Not other cats, other wildlife, humans
 - ❑ Injection or topical still requires catching the cats
 - Who will administer it?
 - ❑ Veterinarians, animal control, lay people



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Other Considerations

- Cost
 - Low-cost spay/neuter: \$15 to \$40 /cat
 - Fundraising for this obvious to public
 - Large numbers of cats need to be done
 - So it is a potentially large market
 - But must be inexpensive
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Conclusions

- Free-roaming cats in the U.S. (and other countries) are a fertile market for nonsurgical sterilization
 - Still controversy about how best to deal with free-roaming cats
 - Practical implementation issues still present
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