

**The Feral Cat Controversy:  
An Interpretive Policy Analysis in Support of TNR**

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## Table of Contents

Summary .....	1
<i>I. Introduction</i> .....	3
<i>II. Literature Review</i> .....	10
<i>III. Background / Context</i> .....	17
<i>IV. Data Analysis</i> .....	21
1. Procedures .....	21
2. Findings .....	23
<i>V. The Conflict</i> .....	36
1. Mapping the Issue Architecture / Frame Analysis .....	36
2. Intervention .....	45
3. Bridging Differences .....	52
<i>VI. Approaches</i> .....	63
1. Evaluation .....	63
2. Recommendations .....	74
3. Implications .....	82
<i>VII. Conclusion</i> .....	84
<i>VIII. References</i> .....	87
<i>Appendices</i> .....	91

## **Summary**

Rapid growth of feral cat populations over the last several decades has typically been unaddressed or approached with intermittent and unsuccessful removal efforts. During this time, a management approach referred to as *TNR* (trap-neuter-return) evolved from efforts of concerned people seeking more effective and humane ways to control feral cat populations. This approach involves trapping feral cats, sterilizing, vaccinating and returning them to their colonies where they continue to live and receive care from caretakers.

In recent years, concern on the part of wildlife advocates about threats feral cats pose to wildlife has led to controversy over the practice of TNR. While reasons and motivations differ, stakeholders agree there should be fewer feral cats. The point of contention is the return of sterilized cats to their colonies. Wildlife advocates believe the cats should be permanently removed. Thus, stakeholders differ on how best to bring feral cat populations under control. The conflict has absorbed stakeholders' time, energy, and resources, detracting from productive action and undermining progress toward mutual goals.

Previous studies have focused on collecting empirical data about feral cats and methods of control; however, the conflict itself has not yet been analyzed. In this study, I explore the controversy from a qualitative interpretive standpoint, analyzing stakeholder documents to uncover underlying values and worldviews, which I interpret for their meanings relative to the debate. I show how clarifying the true basis of stakeholders' opinions can help them understand each other's viewpoints, bridge differences, and allow them to weigh available options more objectively.

Although stakeholder opinions and sentiments are understandable, factors beyond opinions largely determine what is actually possible. Thus, I examine the realities and

practicalities of the various proposed approaches. As with many policy issues, no perfect solution exists and all factors need consideration to arrive at best approaches. While returning cats to colonies is not ideal, TNR as an approach to feral cat management offers a number of advantages. I conclude that because the TNR approach offers the most promise, rather than engaging in conflict, it is most productive to direct effort toward improving and enhancing TNR.

# I. Introduction

## *Research problem*

During the last half of the 20th century, as suburbs expanded, companion animals became increasingly popular and their numbers grew. Until recent decades, few cats were spayed or neutered and most roamed freely. Domestic cats being prolific breeders, the cat population grew rapidly. For various reasons, some of these cats ended up without human homes and became feral. Usually unsterilized, they reproduced and feral populations grew rapidly. The American Pet Products Association (APPA) 2011-2012 National Pet Owners Survey showed the number of cats living in human households to be 86.4 million. Some estimate that currently in the U.S. there are as many feral cats as there are cats living in human households (Armstrong, Tomasello, & Hunter, 2001). While the current APPA survey results indicate 89% of cats living in human households are sterilized, a study by Levy (2003), found only 4% of the feral cats studied were sterilized. Domestic cats have the potential to reproduce at an exponential rate.

The Levy study also showed only 25% of the kittens born to feral mothers survived beyond one year; but even at that rate, the potential for rapid population growth is astounding. While stray and feral dog populations in the U.S. are largely under control, feral cat numbers have continued to rise. Feral cats contribute substantially to cat overpopulation and account for perhaps half of the cats destroyed in shelters each year (Levy & Crawford, 2004). While domestic cat populations have grown, at the same time values and attitudes toward animals have changed, creating greater concern for their welfare and intolerance of killing as a solution to overpopulation issues (Lockwood, 2005).

## ***Feral Cat Concerns***

Reasons for concern over free-roaming and feral cats (definitions to follow) vary from humane issues, nuisance behaviors, zoonotic diseases, contribution to cat overpopulation, and ecologic issues. People who care about cats are disturbed when they see cats and kittens living on their own and foraging through dumpsters for food. This does not fit the notion many people have of the domestic cat living in a human home. Others complain about nuisance issues such as noise and odors associated with cat-mating behaviors. There is also concern about intercat and zoonotic disease issues related to feral cats, though few diseases are transmissible from cats to humans (Levy & Crawford, 2004). Much of the disease concern centers on rabies (Barrows, 2004), although there have been no known cat-to-human rabies cases in the U.S. for several decades (Slater, 2004). Vaccination is an effective preventative measure. Cat-to-cat diseases within feral populations are primarily FeLV (Feline Leukemia Virus) and FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus); however, studies show the prevalence of these diseases in ferals to be similar or slightly lower than in cats living in human homes (Slater & Shain, 2005).

For the last half century, attempts to control feral cat populations have been primarily through removal efforts – both lethal and non-lethal. These efforts have been largely intermittent and ineffective. Over the last several decades, people who objected to lethal extermination wanted to find an effective alternative method of population control. This led to the practice of TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return). TNR involves humanely trapping, sterilizing, vaccinating and returning feral cats to their colonies where caretakers continue to provide care. The intent is that through fertility control, populations will stabilize and ultimately decrease through natural attrition. TNR is performed by individuals and community volunteer organizations. Veterinarians sterilize the cats either as volunteers in clinics or in their own practices.

## *Controversy*

As the TNR method became more widespread, some wildlife advocates became aware of the TNR movement. Perhaps increased human involvement drew attention to the existence of feral cats who previously went undetected. Wildlife advocates and bird enthusiasts were disturbed by the thought of feral cats in the environment preying on small wildlife. They objected to the use of TNR because after being trapped and sterilized, feral cats were returned back to the environment where they could continue to prey on wildlife. This criticism surprised TNR proponents who believed sterilization was the most effective way to reduce feral cat populations.

Wildlife advocates sought out statistics on numbers of birds killed by cats. Lacking good data, they used extrapolations to conclude that cats were responsible for killing many millions of birds, as well as the extinction of many endangered bird species. Widely cited, these alarming numbers raised the ire of wildlife advocates, fanning the flames of conflict. Because TNR involved returning sterilized cats back to the environment, TNR proponents and the practice of TNR became the subject of attack by wildlife advocates. TNR proponents began defending their efforts and thus a controversy was born. This has led to a lengthy ongoing heated debate between wildlife advocates and TNR proponents over feral cats and the practice of TNR.

In fact, all stakeholders share the same goal: eliminating feral cats. Nonetheless, the debate turns out to be quite complicated because, despite sharing the same goal, stakeholders differ substantially in their reasons and motivations, which are rooted in their values, beliefs and feelings. It is these underlying differences that inform their differing opinions on how to reduce populations. Consequently, while sharing the desire for fewer feral cats, they disagree on how best to manage feral cat populations. How to reach the ultimate goal of eliminating feral cats has been the focus of the debate.

The controversy has been exacerbated by a number of factors. These include demonization of the cats and misunderstandings about intentions, resulting in defensiveness on both sides. Ultimately, the debate has become polarized and seemingly intractable. Stakeholders come from different standpoints, arguing past each other. They are deadlocked on whether sterilized cats should be returned to the environment. This prevents them from ever getting to the point of accepting that no approach will be perfect and then weighing options and practical considerations to determine the most feasible and effective way to get to the desired endpoint. The controversy has absorbed stakeholders' time, energy and resources, thus undermining forward progress and detracting from their efforts to take action.

### *Purpose*

In this study, I use a qualitative interpretive approach to public policy analysis (Yanow, 2000) to investigate the controversy between stakeholders in the feral cat issue. To present my findings, I first describe the narratives as told in a selection of various stakeholder documents and discuss the underlying discourses revealed by analysis of these narratives. I then interpret these for the meanings they reveal, showing the cognitive, affective, and moral conceptual sources of stakeholder viewpoints.

I then analyze the stakeholder conflict, by first parsing the essential points of the debate to uncover the ways in which underlying values, feelings and beliefs inform stakeholders' conflicting opinions. By doing so, I frame stakeholders' positions, showing that stakeholders' viewpoints are understandable given their worldviews, and that their differences reflect different ways of seeing. I suggest ways to synthesize opposing arguments and reframe the debate, as a means of bridging differences. Included is a discussion on the important nuances of defining success.

As with many policy issues, various practical considerations are the greatest determinants of what actions are possible. Thus, I conclude with an objective evaluation of proposed approaches to feral cat population control, taking into account over-arching factors and limitations. I argue that, given all the options and considerations, TNR offers the best hope for feral cat population management. I include future implications and suggestions for additional exploration.

### ***Significance***

The scope and complexity of the feral cat issue make it a community concern requiring collaboration between stakeholder groups. Bringing greater understanding to the underlying basis of opposing viewpoints can help parties understand the reasons for and more readily accept each other's differences. This diffuses tension between stakeholders, freeing energy that has been directed at opposition, defending positions and creating obstacles. Realizing that they are arguing from different standpoints can bring down some of the barriers and make it possible for various groups to work more cooperatively. This can create new avenues for discussion, enabling realistic evaluation of options and consideration of ways to make progress toward shared goals, despite differing values and worldviews. When no solution is ideal, collaboration between stakeholders permits seeking out the best approaches so that actions can be directed toward the most productive end.

### ***An interpretive approach to analyzing policy issues***

Studies on feral cats to date have focused on control methods and the cats themselves. However, empirical study does not address the controversy between stakeholders that interferes with collaborative effort toward real solutions. Thus far, research has not included the social-political aspects of the controversy, and the underlying viewpoints held by various contingencies.

Yanow (2000) says that controversy is likely to arise when stakeholder groups hold different underlying values on an issue. She also points out that examples abound of failed policies due to failure to value "knowledge on the ground", meaning how the stakeholders themselves see the issue. The interpretive approach to policy analysis seeks qualitatively to uncover underlying viewpoints in complicated policy debates. The feral cat issue is an emotionally charged policy debate that lacks clear solutions. Qualitative study can bring understanding and provide insight in complex policy issues (Bellah, 1983; Bernstein, 1991; Fischer, 2003b; Jennings, 1983).

"This approach maintains that social values and the historical contexts of policies influence their creation and implementation -- that is, that "facts" are context-specific and therefore political in nature, and that policy analysis cannot be value-free. Its major thrust is investigating the meanings (values, beliefs, feelings) which policies entail for stakeholders, as a way of understanding the role which that policy plays in society as well as its success and/or failure." (Yanow, 1996)

### ***Delimitations and limitations***

This project is intended as a pilot or case study using purposefully selected documents from specific stakeholder groups. Wide variability between stakeholders and feral cat locations and circumstances results in many possible scenarios. As a qualitative study, my findings and conclusions are my own interpretations. The intent of this interpretive inquiry is to provide insight.

### ***Structure***

The structure of this paper is as follows: Part I is an introduction to the problem and to the interpretive approach to analyzing policy issues. Part II is the literature review and Part III provides background and context. Part IV presents my qualitative interpretive policy analysis,

starting with a description of my methods. In Section 2, I present my findings by laying out the narratives from stakeholder documents, discussing the underlying discourses, and interpreting the meaning of these discourses in relation to stakeholders' positions. Part V is an analysis of the conflict in which I map the architecture of the conflict, indicate possibilities for intervention, and suggest ways to bridge differences. In Part VI, I evaluate strategies for feral cat population management, make recommendations, and discuss implications. Part VII is my conclusion; Part VIII is a listing of literature cited, followed by appendices.

## II. Literature Review

### *Existing empirical research*

Uncertainty about how to approach the feral cat issue has led researchers to pursue many convoluted paths, mostly quantitative and empirical in approach. Studies have attempted to generate scientific data in order to gain a better understanding of feral cats and produce generalizable results. The primary focus of research to date has been both on the feral cats themselves and on the effectiveness of various control methods. Studies have been done on diseases (intercat and zoonotic), movements of colony members, reproductive potential, and kitten mortality (Levy, et al, 2003; Nutter, 2005; Stoskopf & Nutter, 2004). Empirical data gathered on various aspects of feral cats and their control have shown that the variability between populations, locations, and individuals is so great that unfortunately it is difficult to come to any generalizable conclusions (Stoskopf & Nutter, 2004). To a large degree, this is because the domestic feline is an extremely adaptable species, found almost anywhere there are humans. Once desert species, both cats and humans now inhabit most places on Earth.

Currently, debate in the literature swirls around issues of best methods of control, concerns about predation on wildlife, and questions about who is ultimately responsible for feral cats (Slater, 2004, Slater and Shain, 2005). Wildlife advocates raise concerns about the impact of cats in the environment preying on wildlife species that may be endangered, arguing that domestic cats, as a non-native species introduced by humans, do not belong in the environment (Barrows, 2004; Jessup, 2004; Winter, 2004). Despite the widely held view that the major causes of species decline and extinction are habitat destruction and human interference, some attribute the decrease in numbers of certain wildlife species to feral cats. This view has been perpetuated by widely cited figures about numbers of birds and wildlife killed by cats that are based on

extrapolations and biologists' estimates (Coleman & Temple, 1997). Others say it is not possible to use these numbers to draw valid conclusions because cats' diets vary depending on available food sources. Given a choice, cats prefer rodents over other prey (Berkeley, 2001). Use of extrapolations for numbers of wild animals killed by cats has incited arguments over which numbers are correct (Slater, 2002).

### *Seeking Solutions*

Wildlife advocates have suggested various lethal and non-lethal approaches to removal and eradication. Generally, they have not considered the viability of these approaches (Slater & Shain, 2005). Traditionally, attempts to control feral cat populations have been lethal means of eradication by poisoning, hunting, trap and destroy, or introduction of lethal diseases. These methods are nearly always enacted on an intermittent or sporadic basis and have been largely ineffective (Armstrong et al, 2001; Levy, Gale, & Gale, 2003). Lethal eradication efforts have worked on a few small islands, but have taken many years and required considerable effort and expense (Bester et al., 2002). Moreover, in these cases the areas were small and contained, and the population densities low (Foley, Foley, Levy, & Paik, 2005). It is questionable whether removal of cats will result in returning an ecosystem to its original state (Slater, 2004; Slater & Shain, 2005). In some areas, cats may even play an important role in controlling non-native invasive rodent populations (Berkeley, 2001). In addition, lethal methods of control are increasingly unpopular with the public (Levy & Crawford, 2004; Slater, 2002; Patronek, 1998).

TNR evolved in recent decades as a non-lethal alternative to eradication (Berkeley, 2001). However, wildlife advocates object to the return of sterilized cats to the environment where they can continue to prey on wildlife (Barrows, 2004; Jessup, 2004; Winter, 2004). The debate over methods of feral cat population control has prompted some research. Much of the

controversy has centered on the TNR method itself – whether or not it is effective in reducing feral cat numbers and whether or not cats that are trapped and sterilized should be returned to their original locations. TNR advocates argue that many years of eradication efforts have shown these methods are not effective. Populations rebound and community resources do not exist to maintain ongoing eradication efforts (Slater & Shain, 2005). Nutter (2005) concluded that eradication methods may reduce numbers temporarily, but some cats will be missed; these reproduce and, combined with new immigrants, populations begin to rise, starting the cycle over again. A study by Andersen, Martin, and Roemer (2004) concluded that eradication was more effective than TNR; however, the study duration was limited to three months. The colonies were not managed or monitored over time to determine if they experienced a subsequent population rebound.

Several studies on TNR and its effectiveness as a control method have shown that TNR can reduce population sizes, particularly in feral cat colonies that are managed (Levy et al, 2003; Nutter, 2005; Stoskopf & Nutter, 2004). A study by Foley et al (2005) concluded that TNR was most effective on smaller colonies, and suggested the need to look for ways to improve existing TNR methods. A significant factor in greater TNR success is the ongoing management of colonies to monitor for newcomers, kittens, and the health and welfare of the colony cats (Levy et al, 2003; Slater, 2002). If volunteers are able to remove kittens and socialized adults, foster them temporarily, and place them in homes, colony numbers will diminish more rapidly (Levy et al, 2003). Little exists in the literature regarding economic aspects of control methods. One study (Nutter, Stoskopf, & Levine, 2004) looked at the time and financial costs of a feral cat live-trapping program. No comparative information exists for eradication methods.

By varying study parameters and feral cat circumstances, researchers looking at the effectiveness of control methods have been able to produce results that fit their desired outcomes. Because study results are inconclusive and ideal solutions seem elusive, controversy and confusion are ongoing. Some suggest that a lack of accurate data fuels arguments and more scientific knowledge will help us work toward better solutions (Stoskopf & Nutter, 2004). Additional study on feral cat numbers could be helpful, but it is likely that accuracy will always be problematic (Levy et al, 2003). Many say we need better data on the effectiveness of TNR to have meaningful conversations about its use as a method of control (Foley et al, 2005). In the opinion of Slater (2002), better systems for tracking and record keeping of colonies would help in determining the effectiveness of management programs. Fennell (1999) suggests that without adequate theoretical frameworks for assimilating and making use of data, compilation of statistics will not lead to a reduction in numbers of companion animals.

Some say that ideally volunteers would socialize and adopt out every feral cat (Jessup, 2004). In reality, the socialization process often takes years, may not be successful, and former ferals often bond with only one person so they cannot be placed in any other home (Nutter, 2005; Slater, 2002). As a result, this approach generally is not feasible, and the ferals may be happier remaining in their outdoor homes. However, kittens born to feral mothers can easily be socialized and placed in homes if removed within eight to twelve weeks from birth (Slater, 2004). Other options for non-lethal control include relocation of ferals to barns or sanctuaries (enclosed protected areas where cats can live the rest of their lives provided with shelter and food). Generally, relocation options are not the first choice because available space is limited, and again, it is difficult for cats to adjust to new locations. Nevertheless, relocation may be

necessary in situations where the location of a colony is not suitable because wildlife species are threatened, or circumstances are unsafe for the cats (Slater & Shain, 2005).

Some opponents of TNR have suggested that the feral cat issue should be addressed at the source, focusing on better education of the public about ownership responsibility, mandatory spay/neuter laws, and support of fostering and adoption programs (Jessup, 2004; Winter, 2004). Few studies have explored the sources of feral cats and ways of reducing new influx into colonies. However, further research focused on the sources of feral cats, while helpful, would still likely have considerable variation. For knowledge about where feral cats are coming from to be useful, ways to mitigate those sources also require consideration. Further study of those factors that influence population size could contribute to improved approaches. Learning more about the sources of feral cats includes looking at people's attitudes toward cats as well as the behavior of dumping and abandoning cats. Slater & Shain (2005) say more needs to be learned about the value of cats in people's minds and the relationship between cats and their human companions.

From the perspective of TNR advocates, the back-and-forth discussions about whether or not TNR is effective in reducing feral cat populations undermine forward progress in controlling the current population of feral cats. Jessup (2004) notes that all wish for fewer feral cats, but common ground has been obscured by focusing on differences rather than similarities in viewpoints. In the opinion of Slater & Shain (2005), punishment or criticism of people who are trying to help cats without human homes is counterproductive.

### ***A community concern***

Stoskopf & Nutter (2004) say that despite varying opinions, the scope of the issue deems that future progress will require differing factions to work together in a rational atmosphere of

cooperation. Margaret Slater (2002) emphasizes that the scope of the feral cat issue mandates solutions that involve community-wide approaches with collaboration and cooperation among various interested parties. The great variety in feral cat circumstances requires multifaceted approaches and solutions tailored to circumstances. No one solution will be appropriate for all situations; a broad spectrum of creative approaches is needed. Recommendations have included using overall approaches that will contribute to better discussion about solutions (Nutter, 2005). Slater and Shain (2005) suggest core guiding principles to ensure success. They say that first is to recognize that all wish for fewer feral cats; the question is how best to reach that goal. Nutter (2005) organized stakeholder meetings to look at possible approaches to the polarization that has arisen around the feral cat issue; she reported the meetings were productive and concluded that conflict resolution, decision analysis, and consensus building could be effective tools.

Slater (2002) says it is important for communities and feral colony caretakers to work together using models from other communities that have been adapted to individual situations. Communities require resources to help cat owners and homeless cats, and to encourage responsible cat ownership as well as rescue, fostering, and adoption programs. Efforts directed at overpopulation of owned cats will also help reduce feral cat numbers, including mandatory sterilization prior to adoption and subsidized or low-cost spay/neuter. Many suggest that veterinarians can play an important role in educating cat owners and the public about responsibilities of ownership and addressing behavior issues. Veterinarians can also work with clients to improve their relationships with their feline companions thus reducing the likelihood of abandonment or relinquishment. (Slater, 2002). In addition, veterinarians can partner with organizations working with feral cats, as well as provide spay/neuter surgeries for feral cats through their practices or participation in feral cat spay/neuter clinics (Slater, 2004).

Armstrong et al. (2001) say significant progress has been made with dog overpopulation; the challenge for the future is to accomplish the same with cats. It has been noted that those seeking solutions should be guided by concern for the welfare of the cats as well as what is best for the particular location and other species, including humans (Lynn, 1998). Midgley (1993) says positivist assumptions have imposed structural laws and theories that have marginalized all sentient and sapient non-human animals and excluded consideration of their interests. Approaches that do not consider the welfare, well-being, and needs of the cats themselves only reinforce the notions that the cats do not matter, attitudes that have contributed to the growth of feral cat populations. Thus, in thinking about approaches, it is important to remember the intrinsic value of the animals themselves, as well as the value of humans (typically taken for granted).

### ***Research from a qualitative standpoint***

While the controversy has centered around the TNR method, the basis for the debate more likely lies in the underlying worldviews of various stakeholder groups (Yanow, 2000). In his work on the kill/no-kill controversy (regarding open-admission shelters that destroy animals for space and limited-admission that do not), Arluke (2003) determined that outwardly expressed manifest or surface tensions are symptomatic of deeper latent tensions, which are rarely verbalized. Identification of underlying sources of tension through qualitative research could be helpful in moving toward resolution of the conflicts between factions in the feral cat controversy. The literature to date does not include qualitative analysis of the opposing factions.

### III. Background / Context

#### *Feral Cats*

Surveys show that the number of cats in U.S. households surpassed dogs in 1992 (Grier & Peterson, 2005). Along with the increase in popularity of cats as companions, populations of cats not living in human homes or feral cats have grown rapidly. Though the number of feral cats in the U.S. has been estimated at one for every cat living in a human home (86.4 million - APPA survey 2011-2012; Armstrong, Tomasello, & Hunter, 2001), accurate numbers are elusive because the cats themselves are elusive. Estimates of feral cat numbers also vary because of differing definitions of free-roaming cat subgroups (Nutter, 2005). “Feral cat” is a broadly used term that encompasses a number of subpopulations. The term “feral,” literally means “gone wild,” but is frequently used to cover all categories of cats without human homes. “Free-roaming” generally refers to cats who are outdoors all or part of the time. Sub-groups under free-roaming cats are those that live in human homes, but spend some of their time outdoors and those that have no human homes. Of those cats that have no human home, some are truly feral because they were born outside or have been on their own for so long that they have become feral. Humans cannot approach or handle truly feral cats. Some of the free-roaming cats without human homes are somewhat or completely socialized because they lived at one time with humans but were then abandoned or lost, often referred to as “stray,” “tame stray,” or “friendly.” These socialized cats are not afraid of humans and may seek human contact. The degree to which individual cats are feral or socialized varies along a continuum. In addition, depending on circumstances, cats may move from one subpopulation to another during their lives, further complicating attempts to estimate the number of feral cats (Patronek, 1998).

### ***What is TNR?***

Being elusive, feral cats often go undetected; however, if a concerned person becomes aware of a group of ferals, he or she may begin to provide food. Those feeding a few stray cats that seem hungry during the winter may be shocked to see a multitude of kittens in the spring – they witness first-hand the potential for rapid population growth. The first thought is how quickly the situation could spiral out of control. The next thought is how to stop it. The first answer is often sterilization to prevent further reproduction. If caught early enough, some kittens might be placed in homes; otherwise, the new offspring soon also become feral. Although sterilization stops reproduction, at a price of perhaps \$100 for a neuter and \$200 for a spay at the local veterinarian, the cost for even two or three cats is too great for most people, particularly for cats they have not acquired intentionally.

A few phone calls to seek help from shelters or animal control will likely reveal that assistance with feral cats is unavailable. Most open-admission shelters accept cats (some do not), but in many places Animal Control does not handle cats at all. Getting feral cats to a shelter requires trapping them for transport, and once there, these cats are put down either immediately, or after the required holding period. Caretakers frequently bond with ferals, so taking them to a shelter where they would be killed is not an option they would consider.

Over the decades, some of the more caring and persistent individuals began to trap cats and seek out low-cost sterilization services. Until more recently, spay-neuter assistance was not available – in many places it still is not. Initially, people had to find veterinarians or shelters willing to offer discounted services to make sterilization of more than a few cats affordable. Eventually, groups of concerned people organized and in some places began high-volume sterilization clinics for feral cats.

Thinking domestic cats deserve warm indoor homes, many well-meaning people brought feral cats inside intending to tame them. Though not impossible, this might take months or years of effort and ultimately be unsuccessful. In many of these cases, the cats were obviously unhappy, never making the adjustment. In the worst cases, such cats might spend the rest of their lives in cages. Realizing that months and years of effort had been fruitless, caretakers concluded that the quality of life of these cats would have been better had they been returned to their outdoor homes, even if it meant exposure to risks and potentially a shorter life. Socialization efforts can quickly absorb caretaker time and energy, while many more cats are still outside continuing to proliferate.

Through these trial-and-error efforts, some people concluded it was most humane to return sterilized cats to their colonies, where they are often quite content. Caretakers could then focus their efforts on monitoring for newcomers and kittens in addition to caring for colony cats. Control of population growth combined with care for the existing cats throughout their natural lives, would lead to eventual extinction of the colony through natural attrition.

Out of these attempts to find non-lethal methods to control feral cat population growth and care for existing cats, the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) methodology evolved and the TNR movement began to take shape. Groups formed consisting of people who shared the desire to help these cats. They realized that the way to have the greatest impact on feral cat colonies was to sterilize as many cats as possible so that at least those cats would not be producing offspring, further contributing to exploding population growth. Though in some ways heartbreaking, the practice of returning cats to their outdoor colonies came to be seen as the best option. Years of experience led to TNR proponents' conclusion that, while not perfect, TNR is the most humane, feasible, and effective option. Currently TNR practice exists in most, if not all states. It is likely

most prevalent in areas with available free or low-cost sterilization for ferals and well-organized and networked TNR groups supported by local officials.

## **IV. Data Analysis**

### ***1. Procedures***

In selecting stakeholder groups, I attempted to represent the spectrum of viewpoints in the feral cat controversy as fully as possible, while still maintaining the scope and focus of this particular study. Sources of data for this study were documents created by stakeholder groups or individuals representing them. To analyze the document texts, I used codes representing moral, affective, and conceptual patterns. These patterns revealed underlying discourses (typically implicit, as opposed to the more explicit narratives) that inform stakeholders' viewpoints on feral cats, both the issue itself and potential solutions. Analysis of the patterns and themes that emerged led to a description of the narratives and underlying discourses. I then interpreted the findings for meaning, seeking out what they revealed about the basis of the controversy and the different viewpoints on how to approach the problem.

### ***Stakeholder Group Selection***

Wildlife, the feral cats, and the public are groups without specific documents representing their viewpoints, but they are nonetheless important stakeholders in the issue. The views of the public are often represented in the documents of the selected groups. Views of the feral cats and wildlife are at times implicit, but it is important to remember that the animals themselves are central to the issue. Following are stakeholder group categories selected for this study. (See Appendices for complete list.)

Veterinarians: TNR proponents and opponents  
Veterinary Medical Associations  
Animal Protection Organizations  
TNR Proponent Groups  
Wildlife Advocacy Groups  
Wildlife  
Feral Cats  
The Public

### ***Document Selection***

The documents were purposefully selected to best represent the viewpoints of stakeholder groups relevant to the controversy and this study. These documents are freely available to the public either in published form or on the internet. (See Appendices for full listing.)

### ***Coding of data***

I analyzed document texts using codes categorized into four general areas: Intentions, Point of View (Context), Actions, and Consequences. I adapted these categories from a section of Professor William Lynn’s “Policy Hermeneutic” model for analyzing policy issues. Coding under “Intentions” concerns stakeholders’ preferred outcome or what they most desire. “Point of View (Context)” codes focus on stakeholders’ worldviews – the underlying values and presuppositions that inform their understanding of the issue and thus their opinions. My intent with this category is to better understand stakeholders’ viewpoints by uncovering the context and structure that inform their values, and vice versa. The third category, “Actions,” encompasses approaches or actual practices intended to cause transformation around the issue. Coding under this category reveals stakeholders’ opinions and preferences regarding potential solutions. “Consequences,” the last broad coding category, concerns stakeholders’ numerous arguments about the potential or predicted consequences of various actions. I coded these consequences according to their impact on the well-being of people, animals (feral cats), and nature (wildlife).

## **2. Findings**

### **Narratives**

Roe (1994) defines policy narratives as "those stories (scenarios and arguments) used by parties to the controversy to underwrite (establish and certify) and stabilize their assumptions for decision making in intractable policymaking situations that persist in the face of uncertainty, complexity and polarization" (pp. 2, 3, 34). Because these stories or narratives reinforce stakeholders' arguments, they often "resist change even in the presence of contradicting empirical data." Roe (1994) says these stories are "a force in themselves that must be considered explicitly in assessing policy options."

### **Wildlife Advocate Narratives**

Documents of wildlife advocates express their concerns about the impact of feral cats on wildlife species. They provide facts in support of their contention that feral cats are significantly responsible for the decline in numbers of wildlife species. They state that domestic cats are a nonnative species that does not belong in the environment. They object to the presence of any feral cats and wish them entirely removed to prevent further predation on wildlife.

Furthermore, wildlife advocates express opposition to TNR as a method of controlling feral cat populations because it involves returning sterilized cats to the environment rather than removing them. To make their case against feral cats and TNR, wildlife advocates assert negative consequences of TNR. Their primary argument is that TNR is not effective in eliminating feral cats. To support their contention, wildlife advocates provide facts and evidence apparently showing that TNR is ineffective and eradication is effective. They also maintain that cats still hunt when fed and thus continue to pose a threat to wildlife even in managed colonies.

Some claim that TNR colonies result in more feral cats because the cats are healthier and food supplies attract more cats, thus maintaining high population densities. Wildlife advocates threaten that TNR may be in violation of the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act because the act of returning cats to the environment could be tantamount to the “take” of endangered species.

They also argue that TNR colonies encourage people to abandon cats in those locations, thinking their unwanted cats will then receive care. In addition, they claim that bothersome nuisance behaviors continue, zoonotic disease risks persist (particularly rabies), and TNR feeding stations may attract wildlife, some of which are rabies-vector species. They contend that TNR is not humane because colony cats continue to suffer, living short, miserable lives susceptible to danger and diseases. They argue that returning the cats after sterilization constitutes reabandonment. They also maintain that TNR groups lack adequate human and financial resources for the proper management of feral cat colonies.

They suggest instead alternatives to TNR to eliminate feral cats. Regarding existing feral cats, they propose permanent eradication of the cats from the environment by government employees and animal control. Once removed, they suggest cats should be taken to shelters, placed in sanctuaries or adopted into homes. They are silent on whether these approaches would be feasible. They also propose getting to the source of the problem, stopping the influx of feral cats by educating the public to be more responsible, encouraging people to keep cats indoors and discouraging abandonment. In addition, they suggest educating the public about the dangers domestic cats pose to birds and other wildlife. Some say veterinarians can play a key role in education of the public. To stop the practices of TNR and feeding of feral cats, wildlife advocates suggest passage of laws that prohibit those activities.

## **TNR Proponent Narratives**

The narrative of TNR proponents centers on their concern for the welfare of feral cats and the suffering that results from uncontrolled population growth. They express the desire to improve the quality of life of existing cats and manage population growth by preventing further reproduction through sterilization. They emphasize that ongoing colony management sustains the benefits of TNR.

### ***Actions / Approaches***

The actions narrative of TNR proponents primarily consists of describing and explaining the activities involved in the practice of TNR and their importance. Generally organized at the grassroots level, TNR efforts begin with trapping, sterilizing, and vaccinating feral cats, then returning them to their colonies where volunteer caretakers provide food, water, shelter, vet care, and monitor for newcomers and kittens. Many TNR organizations foster kittens and socialized adults for eventual placement in homes or they partner with rescue organizations that carry out these activities. TNR proponents stress that colony caretaking is a long-term commitment and people often form attachments to the cats in their care even if they are not able to approach them. While TNR proponents are not averse to efforts to socialize ferals or placement in sanctuaries, they explain these approaches are not practical on a large scale.

The work of TNR proponents includes fund-raising to provide resources for their efforts. TNR proponents see veterinarians as playing a vital role by providing sterilization surgery and educating the public about the benefits of TNR. Veterinarians can also help educate the public about how to strengthen and improve the cat-human bond, decreasing the likelihood that people will abandon their feline companions. Several TNR proponent documents stress the need for

greater collaboration and cooperation between stakeholder groups and within communities, between veterinarians, shelters, local government, and animal control.

### *Consequences*

TNR proponents describe the benefits of TNR for people, feral cats, and nature, believing that TNR is the most humane approach for the cats because it is non-lethal and ferals unaccustomed to living in homes are not relocated into undesirable circumstances but are instead returned to their original, familiar locations. Elimination of mating behaviors through sterilization improves quality of life. In addition, they say TNR effectively controls population growth by preventing reproduction so that populations stabilize and diminish through natural attrition. In weighing the risks to cats, TNR proponents cite studies showing that feral cats have no more risk of disease than cats living in human homes; in fact, feral cats are generally quite healthy and TNR clinic complications are few.

To critics who argue TNR does not work, TNR proponents respond that TNR is effective in reducing feral cat populations, using facts and evidence to substantiate their view that TNR is the best approach. They cite studies that show a significant portion of the feral population (96 percent) is unsterilized, and because some estimate feral cats comprise 50 percent of the overall U.S. cat population, sterilization can have a significant impact on feral populations as well as on the overall cat population. They note estimates that feral cats constitute a significant portion (50 percent) of shelter intakes and euthanasias, a burden on taxpayers and the shelter community that could be lessened by population control of feral cats through sterilization.

TNR proponent documents also address eradication as an alternative approach, emphasizing that extermination efforts used for many decades have been unsuccessful, resulting instead in exponentially increasing population growth. TNR proponents believe that removal to

shelters is inhumane because nearly all feral cats taken to shelters are killed. Also, they say in some cases, when feral cats are removed from an area, new cats will move in and perpetuate population growth.

TNR proponents explain that people also benefit from TNR efforts because fewer feral cats results in a decrease in nuisance factors. Sterilization eliminates annoying mating behaviors such as vocalization, spraying, fighting, and odor from male cat urine. Sterilized cats are also less likely to roam. They also suggest that TNR colony cats vaccinated against rabies can act as a rabies buffer between humans and other rabies vector species. TNR proponents state that nature, wildlife, and the environment also benefit because TNR results in fewer feral cats. They also make the point that many feral cat colonies are in locations where there is no wildlife.

## **Feral Cats and Wildlife Narratives**

Central to the conversation is the perspective of the animals themselves. Their narrative is woven through other stakeholder documents or I have provided it to ensure their representation. The animals did not choose their circumstances, which often are due to human negligence. Their desire to survive motivates their actions – they are simply trying to fulfill their need for food, water, shelter, and protection from danger.

## **General Public Narratives**

Stakeholder documents contain various public viewpoints. Feral cats living near homes and businesses bother some with nuisance behaviors such as noise, odor, digging in gardens, and paw prints on cars. People may complain to town officials or animal control, but often do not want the cats killed as a solution. Others are more concerned about the welfare of feral cats and provide food for them. Even if feeding feral cats is outlawed, many people will continue to do so secretly. Also noted is that people may sabotage or interfere with efforts to eradicate feral cats,

especially if they believe the cats will be removed and killed. This is particularly true for people who have been feeding the cats and have thus formed bonds with them. On the other hand, some members of the public contribute to feral cat populations when they abandon their cats.

Nonetheless, the public also provides a pool of volunteers – people who are willing to help out of concern for feral cats.

## **Public Policy Narratives**

A public policy narrative threads through various stakeholder documents revolving around the question of responsibility and, as with any public policy issue, available funding sources. Wildlife advocates maintain the government should take responsibility for the danger feral cats pose to wildlife, calling for provision of public funding for complete eradication of feral cats by government and animal control agents. They also call for legislation that outlaws TNR and feeding of feral cats. TNR proponents, on the other hand, organize at the grass-roots level due to insufficient public resources. They do, however, advocate for additional public funding for spay/neuter services, noting that this would result in decreased intake to shelters, thus saving money at the shelter level. Public sentiment is mentioned as a factor in the consideration of public policy approaches because of public concern for the welfare of animals and the desire for their humane treatment. Over time, the public has become increasingly intolerant of killing as a solution to companion animal overpopulation.

## **Discourse Analysis**

Here I use discourses in the sense of Foucault: as referring to "systems of thought that construct subjects and their worlds" (Schwandt, 2001). Thus, these are the systems of thought that underlie the narratives conveyed in stakeholders' documents.

## **Wildlife Advocate Discourses**

Underlying discourses of wildlife advocates revealed in their narratives are first of all that nature and wildlife are to be valued. In addition, humans are responsible for preserving the environment in a natural, unspoiled state and preventing additional loss of natural areas. Damaged areas should be returned to their original state. Unnatural elements do not belong and should be purged. Wild species are the victims of dangerous unnatural elements and we should protect them from threats such as invasive species. Often, for wildlife advocates, it is species groups as a whole and their place in the environment that warrant greater consideration than the lives of individual animals. If a species is not native, it should be eradicated even if individual animals die.

Wildlife advocates see domestic cats as an alien species that does not belong in the environment; therefore they promote eradication of feral cats and find the return of sterilized cats by TNR programs unacceptable. The focus of wildlife advocates on the negative consequences of cats in the environment and the benefits of eradication reveals the underlying discourse that any cats outside are undesirable because, whether sterilized or not, they continue to hunt and kill wildlife. The narrative of wildlife advocates centers on what *should* be done, rather than actions they intend to take themselves; in other words, the issue is a public one and responsibility lies with government.

## **TNR Proponent Discourses**

The underlying discourse of TNR proponents is that each cat matters and has intrinsic value as an individual. Consequently, each cat deserves to live and be treated humanely; killing of cats without human homes is unacceptable and inhumane. They see feral cats as the innocent victims of human negligence; thus humans have a responsibility to the cats. Feral cat populations

should be controlled in order to reduce suffering, but approaches should be non-lethal and existing cats should be protected.

Underlying the action-focused narrative of TNR proponents is a discourse informed by the realization that if anything is to be done they must do it themselves; hence the grassroots organization of TNR and the intensity of effort and dedication of volunteers. TNR proponent discourses arise not just out this realization, but also out of awareness of limited feasibility of other approaches, leaving few, if any other options.

The focus of the TNR proponent narrative on the benefits of TNR is informed by their concerns that other approaches will result in harm to the cats or in no action at all. Underlying their opposition to eradication methods is the discourse that killing feral cats is inhumane as well as concern that the situation will become worse rather than better because use of these approaches over many decades has not been effective.

### **Discourses of the Animals**

Discourses of feral cats and wildlife are again about making their own way in the world and seeking to maintain well-being. Wildlife are born wild; however, many face threats due to human habitation in addition to threats of nature. Whether feral cats come to their circumstances by abandonment or birth, we know cats to be territorial and attached to their environment. Preferring not to be relocated, they are generally happier to stay in familiar surroundings. Despite notions that domestic cats should have human homes, unsocialized cats have no desire to be with people and often find them frightening, thus they avoid all contact. Truly feral cats are born wild, not unlike other wild animals. Some have argued that the domestic cat is not truly domesticated (Serpell, 2000). Various emotional discourses superimposed upon feral cats are that they are somehow evil, or conversely, they deserve pity.

## **Public Discourses**

The current predominant public discourse is that the lives of companion animals matter and they deserve humane treatment. Although people may complain about nuisance factors that affect them personally, in general they oppose killing feral cats as a solution. Likely due to personal experience, the public may show more concern for companion animals than wildlife.

## **Public Policy Discourses**

The public policy discourse asks the question: Who is responsible for feral cats? While TNR proponents take grassroots action themselves, wildlife advocates call for government action. Most policymakers, on the other hand, do not give animal issues high priority.

## **Interpretation of Narratives and Discourses**

*"Seek to understand the intentions underlying actors' practical reasoning in particular situations: What are their conceptual boxes? How did they make sense of the situation?... Seek to understand the meaning of texts to their creators/authors and readers, thereby explaining how a text makes sense in a particular context – the context of the culture that comprises the agency or organization or community in which the policy is to be enacted."(Yanow, 2000)*

Clearly, wildlife advocates and TNR proponents differ fundamentally in their worldviews. Wildlife advocates would like feral cats removed from the environment as swiftly and completely as possible. What happens to them is not their primary focus. Most important is preventing feral cats from preying on wildlife. The natural takes precedence over the non-natural; they do not apply the consideration they have for wild species to domestic species such as cats. In addition, because of their focus on the balance of nature and the environment as a whole, wildlife advocates tend not to place intrinsic value on individual animals, accustomed instead to seeing animals in terms of species groups. Conversely, TNR proponents are most concerned about the cats. They wish to alleviate their suffering by caring for existing cats and reducing populations through prevention of future births. While their ultimate goal is to reach a

point where there are no feral cats and all cats have human homes; nonetheless they value the lives of existing cats and believe killing healthy cats is unacceptable.

### ***Who are the Cats?***

Stakeholder documents portray feral cats in strikingly different ways. These portrayals are informed by stakeholders' underlying emotional discourses or feelings about the cats, as well as their intent to persuade readers. TNR proponents portray the cats as innocent victims of human negligence deserving of care and protection. TNR volunteers work closely with the cats and form bonds with them, reinforcing their view of the cats as individuals. Through personal interaction with feral cats, volunteers are aware of their condition and welfare; they often maintain that the cats are surprisingly healthy and hardy. Characterizations of the cats in their documents embody these qualities.

Wildlife advocates, on the other hand, perceiving feral cats as aliens, a threat to what they value most – the natural environment and wild species – demonize feral cats, depicting them as predators that eat innocent wild birds, foreign invaders taking over the environment like a spreading cancer. The cats are often portrayed as mangy, sickly, and miserable, which fits the perception of the cats as evil villains and can serve as additional justification for their elimination.

These depictions of the cats help convey stakeholders' respective viewpoints to their readers. The characterizations of the cats, while based in stakeholders' feelings, at the same time are intended to persuade readers by portraying the cats in a certain light.

In addition, the cats at times become scapegoats, held responsible for the extinction of endangered species. Understanding the reasons cats are held culpable may be more helpful than arguing over whether or not they should be. In reality, it is difficult to determine the exact

reasons for the extinction of various species. Many activities taking place in cities and suburbs have significant impact on wildlife populations. These include use of pesticides, herbicides, rodenticides and fungicides, as well as tree and shrub trimming. Flying into windows is a leading cause of death to birds. Habitat loss, fragmentation and pollution are already taking a toll on wildlife populations; free-roaming cats are just one of many threats. (Winograd, 2007).

However, while humans may be primarily responsible for threats to wildlife, blaming humans presents difficulties since eradicating them from the landscape is not possible. Perhaps singling out the cats presents an easy cause – effect – solution scenario, the case against them appearing straightforward. Cats kill birds; eliminating cats solves the problem. In addition, removal of all feral cats might be easier to envision than a solution for habitat invasion. Where problems and solutions are complex, having a scapegoat provides solace.

In addition to the portrayals of the cats, wildlife advocates' documents give one the sense that all feral cats live near and prey upon endangered wildlife. In reality, circumstances of the cats vary widely depending on location – some live in cities, alleyways, abandoned buildings, empty lots, behind restaurants and dumpsters; others in suburbs, industrial or office parks, backyards and around homes – not necessarily places where there is wildlife. Within the conversation, these distinctions are not always clear.

### ***Use of “Facts, Evidence, Statistics”***

As with many policy controversies, stakeholders back up their arguments with statistics, some well grounded, some anecdotal, specious or exaggerated. To make their case that cats, sterilized or not, hunt wildlife and should be eliminated, wildlife advocates select data intended to show that cats kill enormous numbers of birds. Conversely, TNR proponents cite studies, which show that cats' preferred prey is rodents rather than birds, rodents constituting 80% of

their diets (Berkeley, 1992). At the extreme, some TNR proponents have even claimed that cats do not kill birds.

Wildlife advocates' materials frequently reference "The Wisconsin Study", an article by Coleman and Temple (1997), in which they use extrapolations of small studies as the basis of their claim that nationally, cats kill many millions of birds annually. Interestingly, they never did the study – the authors used the extrapolated numbers to emphasize the need for their research. They have ended up becoming quite famous (or infamous) for their unexpected role in the TNR controversy. Frequently questioned on the subject, they express surprise at the extent to which their proposal extrapolations have been widely circulated by opponents of TNR (Winograd, 2007).

To strengthen their case against TNR, in addition to numbers of birds killed, wildlife advocates produce evidence intended to show TNR is ineffective in reducing feral cat populations. TNR proponents, on the other hand, emphasize evidence to the contrary that shows TNR is effective in reducing feral cat numbers. Of course, variability – in definitions, factors in studies, and circumstances of feral cat colonies – makes it possible to produce data and evidence that substantiates almost any desired viewpoint.

An example is one study that attempts to compare the effectiveness of TNR vs. eradication (Andersen, et al, 2004). Their conclusion is that eradication is more effective than TNR; however, they do not consider the short length of time of the study, or that the TNR group had no ongoing management. Without considering these nuances, results of different studies seem to show that TNR and eradication both “work” or “don’t work”. Of course, these conclusions also depend on how one defines “works.”

### *Misperceptions Fuel Debate / Defensiveness / Polarization*

Stakeholder documents contain indications of confusion about each other's motives. One has the sense that some wildlife advocates believe that TNR proponents think feral cats are desirable, that TNR causes more cats, or that TNR proponents actually create feral cat colonies. The TNR approach had been evolving for several decades before opposition by wildlife advocates arose. Possibly the growth of the TNR movement drew attention to the existence of feral cats, creating the impression of a causal relationship between TNR and the presence of feral cats.

In the debate that plays out in the documents, TNR proponents largely assume a defensive position. It seems that wildlife advocate criticism of TNR surprises TNR proponents, who believe that their work to control population growth through sterilization serves to reduce feral cat numbers. They see no other option because their experience has shown the limitations of alternative approaches. Believing that the decline and extinction of wildlife is the result of human activity, TNR proponents would perhaps not consider risks to wildlife absent criticism from wildlife advocates.

Wildlife advocates' objections to any feral cats, even those that are sterilized, seem to be perceived by TNR proponents as attacks on the cats. The emotional element of TNR proponents concern for the cats is part of what motivates their feeling of responsibility to defend the cats who they feel cannot speak for themselves. I explore these topics in greater detail in the next section.

## V. The Conflict

### 1. Mapping the Issue Architecture / Frame Analysis

*"Identify the meanings that are in conflict between or among groups and their conceptual sources (affective, cognitive, and/or moral) that reflect different interpretations by different communities." (Yanow, 2000)*

To deconstruct the conflict itself, I take apart and examine the various dimensions or categories, identifying the affective, cognitive and moral sources of disagreement reflected in stakeholder arguments. This can be described as determining how different stakeholders frame the issue. Though all stakeholders wish there were no feral cats, what underlies this desire differs dramatically between stakeholder groups. Thus, even though stakeholders agree on some points, differing values and worldviews, conflicting motives and resulting misperceptions undermine possibilities for consensus. By unraveling the basis of the conflict, it becomes possible to see how different aspects of the conflict can be attributed to misconceptions, lack of knowledge about realities and lack of acceptance of other viewpoints.

As we have seen, stakeholders differ in the species they value most. Wildlife advocates value wildlife and the environment. Their concern is for the preservation and protection of both. TNR proponents on the other hand have compassion and concern for cats. They value their welfare, safety and well-being. Wildlife advocates also believe that humans are responsible for protection of wildlife and the environment, and that non-native species should be purged. In contrast TNR proponents believe that each cat's life matters, humans are responsible for feral cats and killing healthy cats is wrong. These beliefs are grounded in stakeholder's worldviews. While, stakeholder's share the desire for no feral cats, their motivations for this desire are quite different. Wildlife advocates wish to eliminate danger to wildlife. TNR proponents, on the other hand want to stop feral population growth while allowing existing cats to live out their lives.

Because wildlife advocates are motivated by their desire to prevent further danger to wildlife, they want immediate results. Thus they wish to eradicate all cats and they object to returning cats after sterilization. TNR proponents, on the other hand, motivated by their desire to prevent further population growth, without harming existing cats, prefer to return sterilized cats to the environment. Thus, in essence, the real point of contention between stakeholders is the return of existing cats to their colonies following sterilization. This is where the battle begins.

Stakeholders' feelings about the return of sterilized cats to the environment inform their opinions on how best to approach feral cat population management. TNR proponents preference for the TNR approach is rooted in their desire to maintain the lives of existing cats. Wildlife advocates oppose TNR because of the "R" – return of cats to the environment – so they argue for eradication approaches that will immediately and permanently remove the cats. As with any debate, to substantiate their respective opinions on approaches, stakeholders promote the benefits of the approaches they favor, while remaining silent on the negatives. Wildlife advocates are silent as to whether eradication methods are feasible or effective. Implied is that simply removing the cats is easy. In addition, there is no mention of the fact that sterilization does actually work in favor of their goals by preventing existing ferals from reproducing. However, despite whatever claims stakeholders make, the true basis of their arguments is their underlying feelings about the return of cats to the environment.

From this point on in the controversy, stakeholder narratives steer away from realistic ways of achieving the goal of fewer feral cats, devolving into counterproductive offensive and defensive posturing. Efforts go to either attacking or defending TNR, as stakeholders attempt to bolster their cases against each other. Wildlife advocates' arguments are more often against TNR than in favor of viable and effective alternatives. Their case rests primarily on the reasons there

should not be any cats in the environment. In addition to risks to wildlife, they cite nuisance factors, such as noise, smell, and disease. They do not address whether a sterilized cat is preferable to an unsterilized cat.

Wildlife advocates' arguments would apply to all cats outdoors, but they use them to make a case against TNR. To put it another way, they are making the case as to why sterilized cats should not be returned to the environment. These arguments could apply to any cats outdoors, but do not consider whether a sterilized cat that can no longer reproduce would be preferable to an unsterilized cat that will continue to contribute to even more cats, thus even more of these problems.

Another argument made against TNR is that it is inhumane. Some say returning cats to the environment constitutes abandonment. Some maintain that killing ferals is more humane than returning them to the environment where they continue to suffer living on their own. In contrast, colony caretakers note that many ferals are quite healthy and happy. They point out that sterilization alleviates the suffering of unneutered cats and dying kittens. Other arguments against TNR are that food sources attract more cats and other wildlife, and that TNR groups lack human and financial resources to maintain colonies.

From this offensive - defensive dynamic, the debate escalates. The emotional protectiveness surrounding stakeholder sentiments fuels vehement defenses and accusations. Consequently, new arguments arise out of the controversy itself, which have no basis in reality and create additional points of conflict between stakeholders. As is typical with polarized controversies, stakeholders push the limits and emphasis of their arguments to the point that they border on questionable or even untrue. The controversy becomes a polarized push-pull dynamic based, to some degree, on false premises and exaggerated claims. These extremes further fuel the

debate. Nuances become buried. The debate takes on a life of its own and absorbs the time and energy of stakeholders to the point that they lose sight of the fact that they share the same ultimate goal. They fail to consider whether their arguments will contribute to the reduction of feral cat populations.

To strengthen their case against cats in the environment, Wildlife advocates' criticism of the cats becomes demonization. Infuriated by TNR advocate's seeming protectiveness of the cats, wildlife advocates begin to portray feral cats as evil perpetrators of violence against wildlife. This fosters a perception that wildlife advocates hate the cats, which deeply offends TNR proponents. Feeling responsible for protecting the cats, TNR proponents become adamantly defensive and fight back against these attacks. Because of the emotional element surrounding their sentiments for the cats, TNR proponents' defenses can become vehement, particularly where there are attempts to remove or destroy cats. This fuels wildlife advocates' perception that TNR proponents place no value on wildlife. These misperceptions on both sides feed the debate and further inflame the controversy, creating further polarization, without consideration as to whether this is constructive.

The documents reveal how stakeholders misperceive the intentions of their opposition, again fueling new controversy over the misperceptions themselves. At times, one has the impression that wildlife advocates believe TNR proponents think it *desirable* to have feral cat colonies. Some wildlife advocate documents seem to imply that TNR proponents actually *establish* feral cat colonies and maybe even *put* the cats there.

One example:

“... the coalition of humane, veterinary, wildlife and public health organizations ... is unlikely to come together as long as feral cat colonies continue to be *established* and supported.” (Jessup, 2004b, italics mine)

Sometimes this goes to the extreme, giving the impression that TNR colonies actually result in more cats. Partly due to these misperceptions, wildlife advocates begin to view TNR and TNR proponents as the problem rather than a solution. These impressions lead wildlife advocates to feel even more justified in their attacks on TNR. In the midst of the controversy, TNR becomes the enemy. Lost in these misunderstandings is the fact that the goal of TNR is fewer cats, not more.

Stakeholders' use of exaggerated or specious data and statistics to bolster their arguments, has also contributed to escalation of the debate. Use of extrapolations to show cats are responsible for killing many millions of birds and causing the extinction of entire species has rankled both bird enthusiasts and TNR proponents alike. Wildlife advocates use these numbers as a reason to oppose TNR. TNR proponents refute these claims, pointing to habitat loss and other human interference as the cause of diminishing bird populations, sometimes even claiming that cats do not hunt birds.

One of the more divisive debates between stakeholders is over the effectiveness of TNR versus eradication. Wildlife advocates have claimed that TNR is not effective in reducing populations. TNR proponents counter saying TNR is effective. Stakeholders predict success with their preferred strategy and failure with the strategy they oppose. Wildlife advocates opine that eradication is most effective because cats are quickly eliminated from the environment. They argue that TNR cannot work because people will continue to abandon cats. Conversely, TNR proponents contend that sterilization will most effectively reduce populations and eradication is ineffective.

To further their case that TNR is ineffective, wildlife advocates make references to studies, which are taken out of context or do not consider all factors. This frustrates TNR

advocates who in turn refer to studies showing that TNR is effective. Misuse of statistics fuels the controversy, pushing use of misleading information to even further extremes, without contributing to productive action. Ultimately, the discussion has broken down to oversimplified polarized opposites of “TNR doesn’t work” versus “TNR works”, with no definition of what is meant by “works”.

Stakeholders tend to come to the debate with their own general perceptions of where feral cats live. Over generalizing about the locations of feral colonies has contributed to the controversy. Wildlife advocates focus on feral cats in close proximity to endangered wildlife, creating the impression that all colonies are near wildlife. On the other hand, danger to wildlife may not even occur to TNR volunteers working with colonies in urban areas. Stakeholders formulate their opinions with these generalized perceptions of feral cat locations in mind, leading to debate over broad-brushed approaches, which are not applicable to all situations.

At this point in the debate, stakeholders are practically and philosophically at an impasse. At polarized opposites, they cannot agree on any point, despite sharing the same end goal. The result is their actions are at cross-purposes. Stakeholders direct energy to attacking and defending, detracting from productive action toward their common goal. When TNR proponents have to fight efforts to stop TNR, it absorbs their already strained resources, keeping them from their primary purpose. The conflict itself becomes the greatest obstacle to progress, undermining the goals of all stakeholders.

Collaboration between stakeholders who share a mutual end goal can be beneficial, but when stakeholders become enemies, cooperation is out of the question. Lacking trust in their detractors, groups become closed circles with an inward protective focus, collaborating only within their own ranks. Wildlife advocates, certain they are right, eschew any opportunity to hear

the perspective of TNR proponents who have first-hand experience working on the issue. Faced with accusations, TNR proponents defend their actions. Lack of stakeholder cooperation hinders progress.

Also of note is the effect of the controversy on the role of veterinarians in the feral cat issue. Stakeholders disagree on the role veterinarians should play. Both sides agree that veterinarians should educate people about their responsibilities to their feline companions. However, while TNR proponents see veterinarians as vital in performing sterilization surgeries, wildlife advocates oppose and discourage veterinary participation in TNR programs, believing veterinarians should oppose TNR and instead educate the public about the dangers of feral cats to birds and wildlife. The anti-TNR sentiments of wildlife veterinarians have pitted some veterinarians against one another. Perhaps lacking sufficient information to formulate an opinion, and not wanting to go against their wildlife colleagues, some veterinarians opt not to support TNR efforts. Perhaps there is also a wariness of grassroots efforts and a belief that only professionals should address these issues.

Another approach of wildlife advocates in their fight against TNR is their effort to institute ordinances that prohibit TNR and feeding of feral cats. Threats that TNR violates the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) are also meant to stop TNR. In her article making the case that TNR violates the ESA and the MBTA, Hatley (2003) asserts that returning sterilized cats to the environment constitutes abandonment. Wildlife advocates are silent, however, on whether prosecuting people practicing TNR would actually help in the effort to reduce feral cat populations.

Conflicting opinions on approaches to the feral cat issue have presented ethical dilemmas within some animal interest organizations. A position that coincides with the views of one

interest group may conflict with those of another. The AVMA for example, faces the challenge of conflicting interests between veterinarians caring for a variety of animal species, including wildlife and companion animals, making it difficult to formulate a position statement representing all members of the organization. The HSUS and the ASPCA, concerned with the welfare of all animals, face this same dilemma. Attempting to avoid alienating interest subgroups, organizations may use carefully chosen language to avoid making strong or definitive statements, resulting in ambiguous positions that reflect the conflict between wildlife and companion animal interests.

***The Conflict***

<b>Wildlife advocates</b>		<b>TNR proponents</b>
<b>Wish there were no feral cats</b>	<b>Shared Goal</b>	<b>Wish there were no feral cats</b>
Value wildlife Concern for wildlife	Value different species	Value cats Concern & compassion for cats
Wildlife & the environment should be protected. Humans responsible. Non-native invasive species should be purged / unnatural removed.	Different moral values	Humans are responsible for feral cats. Killing healthy cats is inhumane / wrong. Each cat’s life matters; they have a right to live.
Do not want any cats in the environment in order to protect wildlife.	Different Motivations	Want to improve feral cat welfare by decreasing / stopping population growth through sterilization while protecting existing cats.
<b>Want all cats removed.</b>	<b>THE CONFLICT</b> Primary issue: <b>Existing Cats</b>	<b>Want to return sterilized cats.</b>
Want feral cats eradicated. Oppose TNR because cats are returned.	Disagree on approaches – the consequence of views on existing cats.	Have concluded that TNR is the best approach.
Attack TNR Arguments are primarily to make the case against TNR (critical position in conflict). Use arguments against all feral cats to make case against TNR, do not distinguish between cats in colonies and those not. TNR is part of the problem.	Arguments	Unprepared for attacks, believe their work is to reduce populations. Defend TNR. A sterilized cat is better than an unsterilized cat.
Portray cats as evil / demonize cats.	Extremes	Defend the cats due to emotions/beliefs/values.

Use exaggerated statistics. Fuels defensiveness & controversy.	Extremes	Dispute statistics. (Habitat destruction.)
<b>Argue that TNR does not work.</b>	<b>Polarization</b>	<b>Argue that TNR works.</b>
TNR proponents' emotional defenses of the cats leads to: Believe TNR proponents want feral cats, establish colonies. Believe TNR proponents place greater value on cats than wildlife.	Misperceptions	Wildlife advocates' attacks on TNR and the cats leads to: Believe wildlife advocates hate cats. Defend vehemently due to feeling of responsibility to protect cats.
Perception that all feral cats live where they can prey on wildlife	Misperceptions	Often working with ferals in areas away from wildlife, danger to wildlife doesn't occur to them.
Attack TNR proponents (those doing something).	Further escalation / fuels controversy. New arguments arise out of the conflict itself / due to polarization.	Defend themselves and TNR.
Efforts go to fighting TNR.	<b>Deadlock / impasse: time, effort, energy, resources diverted from productive action.</b>	Efforts go to defending TNR against wildlife advocates' criticism.
Enemies - not interested in collaboration.	No collaboration	Enemies - wouldn't consider cooperation.
Vets should oppose TNR and educate the public on dangers to wildlife.	Veterinarians feel obligated to choose one side or the other or are uncertain and make no decision.	Vets should support TNR and help by providing low cost care and surgery.
Pushing to outlaw feeding & TNR, prosecute due to violation of Endangered Species Act.	Laws	Fight to prevent.

***In Summary:***

<b>Wildlife advocates</b>		<b>TNR proponents</b>
Wish there were no feral cats	Shared Desires	Wish there were no feral cats
Protect wildlife	Different Motivations	Improve feral cat welfare
Value wildlife & the environment. Non-native elements should be purged.	Divergent Values	Concern for feral cats. Killing is inhumane.
Want cats eliminated.	Disagree on Approaches	TNR is the best approach.
	<p>↘ ↙</p> <p><b>THE CONFLICT</b></p> <p>↙ ↘</p>	

Oppose TNR because cats are returned. All arguments are to make the case against TNR. Portray cats as evil.	Polarization	Unprepared for attacks. Defend TNR. Defend the cats.
Believe TNR proponents want feral cats.	Misperceptions	Believe wildlife advocates oppose cats.

## **2. Intervention**

Yanow (2000) explains that the goal at this stage of the analysis is to "show that the differences between groups derive from different experiences, backgrounds, and so forth, and that these represent different ways of seeing rather than groundless obstinacy or any of the other myriad ways people have of dismissing opposing views." She notes that Pal (1995) "shows how policy analysts can play a role in helping members of contending groups understand that they have epistemological and ethical differences, not merely differences over priorities, which shape as well as derive from their access to and treatment of local knowledge."

By reframing the debate, viewpoints can be seen in a different light, helping to break down dead-locked positions and allowing stakeholders to reach greater understanding of each other's positions. From here, they can begin to realize that their opponents are in fact not evil, but rather have different values and worldviews. Unraveling the basis of the conflict reveals where misconceptions, lack of knowledge and polarization have contributed to disagreement.

Given that stakeholders' opinions originate in divergent concerns for either wildlife or feral cats, they are not likely to adopt each other's perspectives. Wildlife advocates hold deeply their philosophical convictions concerning our duty to maintain the environment in its natural state. Likewise, TNR proponents are passionate in their concern for feral cats. However, neither side is wrong. Rather completely different worldviews inform their passions.

Nonetheless, the concerns of all stakeholders are for the welfare of other living beings. The value stakeholders hold for different groups of animals was not at the outset rooted in disdain for other species. Wildlife advocates' demonization of the cats to bolster their case for their elimination, is likely rooted in the debate itself rather than some long-held disdain or hatred for cats. Conversely, TNR proponents are not dismissive of wildlife; they have simply focused their concern on feral cats. They have no desire for cats to kill wildlife.

Given their underlying motivations and worldviews, stakeholders' differing opinions on the ongoing presence of cats in TNR colonies are quite understandable. In fact, their philosophies would not be incompatible if wildlife and cats were not living in close proximity. Their values would not be in conflict if sterilized cats were not returned to places inhabited by wildlife. Though stakeholders differ in their motivations, they share the same ultimate goal, thus they should have a greater chance of reaching agreement.

The degree to which different stakeholder groups have been actively involved in implementing solutions seems to be a factor in their opinions on approaches. TNR proponents have long struggled to determine how best to reduce feral cat numbers. TNR did not arise because it was a perfect solution. Only after years of trial and error did they come to see TNR as the most humane and effective way to achieve the goal of fewer feral cats.. Other non-lethal approaches, such as placement in homes, sanctuaries or barns, were acceptable, but impractical on a large scale, and thus not their primary focus.

So TNR proponents became committed to maintaining a laser like focus on sterilization and colony management. Other actions became secondary to avoid diversion from the primary goal. These principles are difficult to understand without knowing their evolution. To appreciate

the reasons for returning cats requires a deeper knowledge of lessons learned during the growth of TNR, as well as the limitations and practicalities of other options.

In contrast, wildlife advocates' efforts have been primarily in opposition to TNR. They have not been actively engaged in eradication of feral cats or alternative solutions. Their views come from their ideologies rather than practical considerations. Not having participated in the decades-long evolution of TNR, they may not fully grasp the challenges and scope of the feral cat issue. Lack of first-hand knowledge and experience perhaps makes it difficult for wildlife advocates to realistically evaluate the practicalities and limitations of the solutions they propose.

Wildlife advocates raise the argument that cats continue to hunt even when fed. However, they do not mention that sterilization would result in fewer cats to do the hunting. One might also assume that fed cats would have less drive to hunt than hungry cats. In addition, TNR opponents argue that feral cats can spread feline and zoonotic disease, however there is no evidence that the risk is significant. Another consideration is that any concerns about disease risks may be a minor issue relative to the overall problem of growing populations. Wildlife advocates' assertion that returning cats is inhumane is likely intended to further their case against TNR rather than express concern for the cats. Their argument that killing ferals is more humane also assumes that approach would be feasible.

All of these arguments come from the standpoint of criticism of TNR, intended to make the case that because TNR proponents are returning cats to the environment, they are part of the problem. As a result, wildlife advocates attack TNR and TNR advocates. Not considered is whether arguing against TNR will contribute to formulating viable solutions. Many of the arguments are insignificant if the alternative to TNR is allowing feral cats to continue

reproducing, resulting in even more feral cats and therefore exacerbation of all problems resulting from ferals.

Ironically, TNR proponents would actually agree with many of wildlife advocates' arguments against cats in the environment. These are some of the very reasons TNR proponents are working to reduce populations. They believe they are doing the right thing by working to stop feral cat population growth, thus diminishing the problems that result from cats in the environment. Unprepared for criticism from wildlife advocates, TNR proponents end up on the defensive because they feel they are being attacked for doing what they believe will result in fewer feral cats.

These misunderstandings and misperceptions result in stakeholders' viewpoints appearing further apart than they actually are. Wildlife advocates' notion that TNR proponents actually want feral cats is erroneous. Perhaps wildlife advocates misinterpret TNR proponents' impassioned defenses and protectiveness of the cats to mean that they believe feral cats are desirable. Rather, TNR proponents find the circumstances of feral cats less than ideal. Colony caretakers are discouraged when they see new kittens in the spring. While TNR proponents want to protect existing cats, their goal is nonetheless to reduce the number of feral cats to zero. They would much prefer that all cats have human homes, instead of living as ferals.

The perception that TNR groups actually establish feral cat colonies is also inaccurate. Perhaps new presence of volunteers and feeding stations create the impression that a new TNR colony has been established. However, TNR volunteers do not bring the cats there. On the contrary, TNR begins because the cats are already there – the purpose being to stop population growth.

Wildlife advocates' perception of TNR and TNR proponents as part of the problem rather than the solution obscures the reality that the cats were there before TNR – reproducing prolifically – the reason TNR proponents wish to intervene and stop the cycle of reproduction. Feral cats will exist with or without TNR, but TNR colony cats are no longer reproducing. Without intervention, population growth continues unchecked.

Arguments over the effectiveness of approaches are futile without clear definitions of what constitutes success. Wildlife advocates do not distinguish whether sterilized cats in TNR colonies are preferable to unaltered cats that will continue to reproduce, increasing the number of cats preying on birds. Assessments of approaches need to consider whether progress or improvement is preferable to doing nothing and allowing the situation to become worse. Continuing to seek answers with better empirical evidence leaves factions to fight perpetually back and forth about the science, never getting to real issues and solutions.

Wildlife advocates' contentions that eradication approaches are faster, more effective and eliminate ongoing presence of feral cats in the environment, are true in theory. However, academic discussions over the effectiveness of approaches are of little use without consideration of feasibility and other influencing factors. It is not useful to claim superior outcomes for approaches that are impossible to implement. In addition, one must consider effectiveness over the long-term. Approaches need to be effective not just over the short-term, but the long-term as well.

Wildlife advocates argue that TNR cannot work because people will continue to abandon cats. This is illogical if one considers that abandonment will happen with or without TNR. While abandonment is an important issue, which needs consideration, it is nonetheless a contributing factor independent of the effect of TNR. It is not logical to use external factors as evidence that

TNR does not work. Population increases caused by external factors, such as influx due to abandonment, need to be considered separately.

Looking more closely at scientific data used to substantiate viewpoints reveals some of the ways stakeholders have used information inaccurately and divisively. There is no way to know with certainty how much wildlife cats have killed, or which factors are responsible for the decline or extinction of various species. However, cats outdoors undoubtedly kill at least some birds, even if birds are not their preferred prey. Again, the argument over the number of birds cats kill would apply to all cats in the environment, not just those in TNR colonies, thus it is not a logical argument against TNR.

Because locations of feral cats vary widely, it is impossible to make accurate general statements about their circumstances. Heated controversies often arise about places where feral cats and endangered wildlife inhabit the same spaces. Thus, these locations receive greater attention, creating a distorted impression of the overall impact of feral cats on wildlife. In reality, places where feral cats live alongside endangered wildlife represent a small proportion of feral cat locations. In some places, feral cats may actually help protect native wildlife from the effects of other invasive species (Zavaleta, et al, 2001).

Because many jurisdictions do not address feral cat issues at all, TNR may be the only existing effort to manage feral cat populations. Ironically, wildlife advocates trying to stop TNR, may be eliminating the only existing effort. TNR groups consist of people committed to working on the feral cat issue. When wildlife advocates fight the TNR approach, they also alienate a large number of committed volunteers. If wildlife advocates successfully stop TNR efforts, they also eliminate these people who share their goal of reducing feral cat numbers.

Veterinarian's positions on TNR are important because their opinions on animal issues garner respect. Energy directed toward influencing veterinarians to support or disfavor TNR is counterproductive. Unified support of the veterinary community would benefit both sides. The roles stakeholders envision for veterinarians need not be mutually exclusive. Veterinarians can participate in solutions in multiple capacities, educating people about their responsibility to their feline companions, while at the same time assisting sterilization efforts by performing surgeries on ferals.

Wildlife advocates' threats that TNR may violate endangered species acts are understandable given their desire to eliminate the practice of TNR. However, the argument is questionable since people doing TNR do not initially put the cats in those areas. The cats were already there and would still be there with or without TNR. TNR volunteers simply have them sterilized to prevent further population growth – a benefit on all accounts. In addition, a person abandoning a cat is acting irresponsibly, whereas a TNR volunteer is acting responsibly by preventing a cat that was already there from producing additional offspring. Because the intentions in each case differ, it is questionable whether a court of law would treat the two circumstances equally. Most important is to question whether prosecuting TNR workers for violation of these laws, justified or not, would help in reducing the feral population.

Few policy issues have perfect solutions. Complex policy issues, without ideal solutions require seeking out the best solutions rather than perfect solutions. It is not productive to throw out the best solution available because it is not perfect. Finding solutions requires creativity and willingness to make concessions. Since stakeholders in this case have the same goal, the possibilities for collaboration should be greater. Combining forces can pave the way for avenues

of progress that might become possible through networking and sharing of ideas, knowledge, energy and resources.

### **3. Bridging Differences**

Yanow (2000) describes this last step of analysis as being in the form of "negotiation or mediation to bridge differences...conflicting interpretations would be identified and explained as such...an educative process that takes as its goal the fostering of discussion honoring the reality of entrenched viewpoints, while nonetheless seeking engaged discourse and debate" among stakeholders. She explains further that the "analyst can help generate new ideas for policy action...by synthesizing opposing arguments or reframing the debate at another level...thereby leading to a new understanding among the contesting parties" and pointing to new avenues for action. See also Fischer (2003b), Rein (1983), and Roe (1994).

It is important for stakeholders to recognize that, despite how it might appear, the viewpoints and opinions of all stakeholders originate in worldviews rather than disdain for the opposing faction. Again, recognition and respect of other stakeholder's passions as different, but not wrong, could help bridge the divide. If stakeholders are willing to step back and look beyond the importance of their own arguments, they may see how undermining possibilities for collaboration is counterproductive. However, to begin any kind of discussion, they have to be willing to abandon their offensive and defensive posturing and attempt to understand the basis of the views of the opposition. From here, they can seek a middle ground where they can cooperate and move forward more productively.

In truth, stakeholder's disagreement on approaches is the result of a conflict in values, not a clash of feelings about cats. Their positions on approaches are not informed by evil, but rather their values and worldviews. Stakeholders' opinions on approaches are understandable given

their worldviews. Their worldviews inform their feelings about returning cats to the environment, which inform their opinions on approaches. Better understanding could be achieved if stakeholders could recognize that their true point of disagreement is over the return of sterilized cats to the environment.

Even though stakeholders are unlikely to adopt each other's disparate values, some of the hostility might be dispelled if they could recognize that all viewpoints are grounded in value for living beings, rather than contempt for each other. Recognition that the values of neither side are wrong might allow them to have greater respect for each other's values. Clearing away some of the entrenched viewpoints that create barriers could help stakeholders understand that all sides desire the same outcome and realize they can assist each other in attaining their common goals. It would be helpful if stakeholders could appreciate the advantages of sharing the same goal, despite having different motivations.

Wildlife advocates will never be happy about returning sterilized ferals to their colonies where they may continue to be a threat to wildlife. However, the number of existing cats is small compared to the number there will be if the existing cats continue to reproduce. It is important to consider whether the focus on removing existing cats is obfuscating the larger issue that the greatest contributor to population growth is reproduction of unsterilized cats. Stakeholders need to consider where to target their efforts in order to have the greatest impact on the most significant sources of population growth.

With better understanding of TNR and the challenges of the feral cat issue, wildlife advocates might better appreciate why TNR is perhaps the best choice we have. Despite strong opinions, external limiting factors may ultimately determine what is realistically possible.

Considering TNR as even part of the solution, might break down some of the obstacles to TNR efforts and enable stakeholders to work collaboratively.

Stakeholders need to recognize the futility of arguing false extremes and be willing to distinguish between productive and destructive arguments, and then dispense with those that do not contribute to reasonable discussion. Acknowledgement of those opinions that have been taken to false extremes can bring viewpoints into a more realistic framework. By bringing arguments back to reason, viewpoints are likely to appear closer, rather than at polarized extremes.

While different stakeholders are unlikely to place the same value on the lives of the existing cats, it would be helpful to understand how they have misperceived and been misperceived. Realization that opinions of wildlife advocates did not originate in scorn for cats, nor those of TNR proponents in disregard for wildlife, could diffuse some of the animosity created by these misperceptions. In addition, it would help to recognize that demonizing and blaming feral cats is not useful and creates further defensiveness on the part of TNR proponents. Avoiding extremes of demonization and protectiveness might prevent some of the misperceptions that only add to further polarization.

It would also help if stakeholders could understand and acknowledge how their viewpoints have been misinterpreted by their opponents. In other words, if TNR proponents could see that their protectiveness of the cats is perceived by wildlife advocates as disregard for wildlife, and if wildlife advocates could see that their demonization of the cats is perceived by TNR proponents as hatred of cats. In addition, it could help diffuse some of the animosity between stakeholders if TNR proponents could recognize that wildlife advocates demonization

of feral cats is not based in scorn for the cats, and in turn, if wildlife advocates could see that TNR proponents' protectiveness of cats is not based in disregard for wildlife.

Clarification of the misperceptions about the intentions of TNR proponents might also allay some of wildlife advocates' misgivings about them. Wildlife advocates' perception that TNR proponents are the enemy and part of the problem might be alleviated by understanding that TNR proponents' concern for feral cats does not arise from a desire to have feral cats; on the contrary, the intent of TNR is actually to eliminate feral cats. Greater knowledge of the limited options for feral cats could help wildlife advocates understand that, while TNR involves returning cats to live on their own, TNR advocates are not happy about having to do so.

In addition, wildlife advocates should understand that TNR proponents do not establish colonies or cause more feral cats. TNR is essentially sterilization and management of already existing colonies, practices that result in fewer cats, not more. True, the sterilized cats will still be living there, but the population will not continue to grow and the colony will eventually disappear. Greater understanding of the motives and intentions of TNR proponents could narrow the divide, making it possible for broader consideration of the more significant factors, which affect options available.

As we have seen, wildlife advocates' objections to feral cats are clear and not unreasonable; however, wildlife advocates need to consider whether attacking the TNR approach will help to accomplish their goals. Focusing criticism on TNR proponents does not help determine solutions. Wildlife advocates should recognize that many of their arguments against TNR are actually arguments against any cats outside. Objecting to TNR because of the return of cats ignores the fact that TNR reduces population growth.

They need to consider whether a TNR cat is preferable to an unsterilized cat. If realistic evaluation, considering all factors, reveals that the likely alternative to TNR is no action at all, those opposed to TNR need to weigh whether having some sterilized cats living in colonies is preferable to allowing reproduction to continue unchecked. Sometimes, it is more productive to think in terms of better and worse approaches, rather than ideal or perfect solutions.

Discussions about the effectiveness of approaches would be more meaningful if preceded by discussion on defining “success” and whether progress should be considered success. It is then possible to talk in terms of better and worse approaches, or decide whether some success is better than no success. (See discussion below in section entitled “Defining Success”.)

Much of the data already produced around the feral cat issue could be beneficial if interpreted without bias and mined for useful knowledge rather than ammunition to bolster extreme viewpoints. It is not productive to continue arguing over the number of birds killed when knowing actual numbers would have little impact on strategy. Similarly, continuing to demand better data to show whether TNR does or does not work is not useful if the actual factors that make TNR more or less effective are not taken into account. Complex studies are not needed to know that a sterilized cat will no longer reproduce. Most important is to question whether having actual numbers would have any impact on available options.

Heated discussion over approaches to feral cats might diminish if stakeholders recognized that feral colonies exist in a wide variety of circumstances. The concerns are not the same for all. Speaking in broad-brushed generalizations, which apply only to specific circumstances, has limited usefulness. Holding onto these narrow views limits nuanced discussion of various approaches. Abandoning rigid viewpoints could open up discussions that would result in more appropriately tailored solutions.

Stakeholders need to recognize that they all agree on the end goal and that their conflicting opinions have interfered with forward movement. Rather than debating who has the best solution in theory, stakeholders need to be willing to realistically assess the practicalities and limitations of various approaches. By taking a teleological approach instead of an ideological approach, they can instead turn their focus to how best to reach their mutual goal. In this way, stakeholders can come to a better understanding of which approaches are most feasible and effective and then direct energy and resources toward improving and intensifying those approaches.

Questions to consider are:

Is eradication feasible, and if so, will it actually be more effective than TNR?

If TNR is the only feasible approach, will it result in fewer feral cats than doing nothing at all?

If eliminating TNR exacerbates the issue, rather than making it better, it could be more productive to consider ways to improve TNR rather than fighting it. The challenge for wildlife advocates is to recognize that despite their objection to TNR, it may be the best and only means of attaining the end result that all desire. Accepting an approach may not mean embracing it, but rather recognizing the limitations of other approaches.

The Foley, et al (2005) article on their study of TNR effectiveness reports “mixed” results. Opponents of TNR have used this article as evidence that TNR does not work. However, the authors’ intent was not to say that TNR does not work, but rather to encourage exploration of how it could work better. As stated in their conclusion: “Results may be used to suggest possible future monitoring and modification of TNR programs, which could result in greater success controlling and reducing feral cat populations.”

Collaboration between wildlife and TNR organizations can help, not only to resolve disputes, but also to provide opportunities for understanding between stakeholders of their respective goals and motivations. Wildlife advocates can learn more about the reasons for TNR and the importance of the focus on sterilization and management of as many colonies as possible. TNR proponents can become more conscious of the concerns about danger to wildlife.

Veterinarians can avoid undermining forward progress by abstaining from polarized arguments. Clarification to the veterinary profession of the issue and the options available could help dissipate anti-TNR sentiments and clear the way for veterinarians to participate in the ways they feel personally inclined, free from influence of the debate. It is counterproductive for veterinarians to oppose grass roots TNR efforts on the basis that volunteers are not professionals, when these volunteers may be the only help there is.

Regarding attempts to use laws to prohibit TNR, it would be most helpful if factions could acknowledge that their intent is to fight TNR rather than take productive action. Wildlife advocates might consider whether outlawing TNR would produce favorable results. If reality dictates that the only alternative to TNR is doing nothing at all, outlawing TNR may not be the best choice. Willingness to consider the real impact of these laws could result in a redirection of effort and energy toward more productive actions.

## **Defining Success**

As mentioned above, a large part of the TNR debate has been arguing over whether TNR is actually effective, with the argument being oversimplified down to statements of “TNR works” versus “TNR doesn’t work”. These differences in stakeholders’ definitions of success are the result of the differing motivations. Wildlife advocates focus is on elimination of the cats, thus, if *overall* population size is not decreasing, in their view, TNR is “not working.” TNR

proponents, on the other hand, wish to stop spiraling population growth, so from their perspective, “TNR works” because sterilization guarantees fewer offspring. When a colony is sterilized and managed, decreasing the growth rate, a level of success has been attained. Ultimate success is when numbers decrease to zero through natural attrition.

Without clear definitions of what constitutes success, arguments over effectiveness are futile and stakeholders continue to talk past each other. More nuanced definitions could facilitate better discussions. In fact, a number of factors contribute to population rates of growth or decline, including the number of new immigrants, the percentage of the population sterilized and the number of cats and kittens removed for placement. Direct comparisons made without considering these different variables result in inaccurate conclusions.

To say a TNR colony population increase is evidence that TNR does not work is an erroneous oversimplification, which ignores the reality that under no circumstances do sterilized cats produce additional offspring. If those cats instead continued to reproduce, some portion of their offspring would survive to reproduce and so on, increasing the population accordingly. If population size increases, it cannot be because cats were sterilized.

In the Foley, et al (2005) study, overall population sizes did not decrease. Wildlife advocates have cited this study as evidence that TNR does not work. However, not addressed is how much more the populations would have increased without implementation of TNR. Of course, it's impossible to measure what doesn't happen. But we can say that the populations would have increased more than they did.

Even a well-monitored TNR colony with 100% sterilization could experience some growth due to newcomers, despite having no new offspring. However, unsterilized populations can potentially experience exponential growth, whereas population growth due to immigration

alone is typically minimal. Newcomers do not negate the positive effect of decreased growth rate due to sterilization.

If a colony is not 100% sterilized, unless all kittens are removed, the unsterilized cats will cause population size to increase to some degree. Nonetheless, the rate of increase will be much less than if none of the cats were sterilized. The higher the percentage of cats sterilized, the more quickly the growth rate decreases and population size begins to diminish. Even if one female is sterilized, growth rate will diminish. It is generally thought that to reach the point where a population is decreasing in size, 70% of the cats must be sterilized. At that point, decrease due to attrition will exceed any increase due to new kittens.

One might argue that population size could increase due to greater availability of resources (fewer deaths), which might be true in some cases, but in many, if not most places, saturation has not been reached and potential for growth due to reproduction is significant. Some might also argue that the population has already stabilized due to limited resources and will stay constant despite any measures taken. In reality, it seems that cats will continue to reproduce under any circumstances and will likely find resources elsewhere if not sufficient in their current location.

Debates over TNR effectiveness rarely distinguish between changes in overall population size and change in the rate of population growth. More careful consideration reveals several potential outcomes. Overall population size can be increasing, decreasing or stable. Independent from overall population size, the *rate* of growth can also be increasing, decreasing or stable. (See Figure 1.)

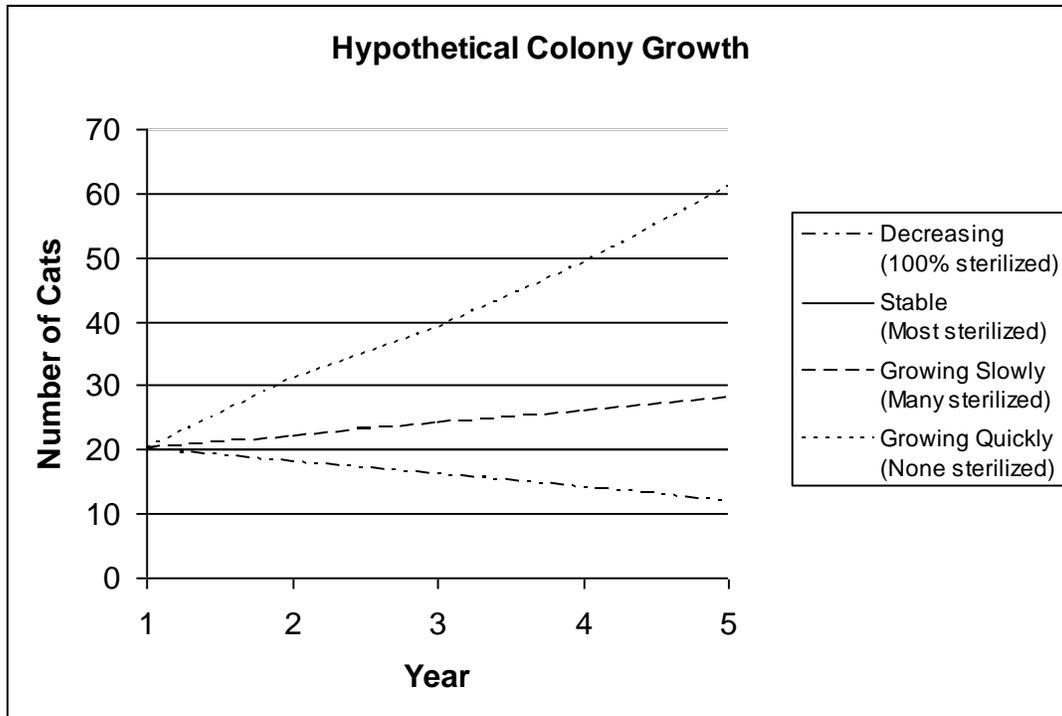


Figure 1

Consideration of these nuances can lead to better definitions of progress, success, and failure of TNR. New questions will arise. Rather than “Does TNR work?”, better questions might be: Does sterilization decrease the *rate* of population growth?; or, Is it progress if the rate of growth rate decreases? This could then lead to asking: If there is progress, can the TNR method be considered effective?; or, Is TNR working if populations increase less than they would have without TNR?

One might decide that slowed growth is an improvement over spiraling growth, and that a population increasing more slowly constitutes progress. Instead of defending TNR by simply saying, “TNR works,” it might be more accurate for proponents to say TNR effectively slows population growth by preventing reproduction.

Since policy problems are rarely black and white and few have perfect solutions, it is often most productive to seek out best solutions, recognizing that ideal solutions are unlikely to

exist. Improving a situation is better than allowing it to get worse. If opposition to TNR obstructs all action, unless viable alternatives exist, circumstances will only deteriorate.

## **VI. Approaches**

Praxis is the interplay between theory and practice, thought and action, ends and means. Praxis does not start with prior knowledge of the right means by which to realize an end. Rather, it begins by asking what is the desired endpoint and then deliberating the appropriate means for the particular situation (Bernstein, 1983). As the deliberation proceeds, there is interplay between the ends and the means such that the desired endpoint and the way it is achieved may vary. This process involves interpretation and understanding. It requires a commitment to well being, a search for the truth, and respect for others, rather than what is advantageous for oneself. Praxis is action that embodies freedom of choice and the willingness to take the risk to make a wise and prudent practical judgment about how to act in the particular situation.

### **1. Evaluation**

The title of Margaret Slater's article for the HSUS is "Who's Ultimately Responsible for Free-Roaming Cats?". Her article implies that the answer to this question is: The reader, communities, and society as a whole are responsible for free-roaming cats. We are all responsible for the voiceless in our communities who need help. Ignoring the suffering of the innocent is a detriment to society. In this case, realizing and accepting our responsibility to all living beings includes protecting wildlife from human interference as well as taking responsibility for feral cats whose circumstances are human-caused. Where these responsibilities collide, extra consideration is needed.

Though stakeholders' value of species differs, in the end, it may be not be a question of certain species having greater value, but rather all warrant our consideration. Policies often entail conflicting responsibilities that require negotiation to find a balance and determine the best approaches. Reaching agreements almost always requires trade offs. In the end, practicalities

may be the determining factor. While all agree on the desire for fewer feral cats, stakeholders' respective opinions on strategies diverge due to their differing values. However, the strategies they prefer are not necessarily those that will be most effective or feasible. To be effective, strategies must be feasible.

Realistic assessment of feasibility of approaches has been hindered, not only by differences between stakeholders, but also by lack of appreciation for both the enormous number of the feral cats and the limitations on available resources. Realistically weighing options from a more practical perspective reveals what is possible and what is not; thus, a clearer picture emerges of how best to proceed. Multiple factors account for feral cat population increases. Strategies that target those factors contributing most will have the greatest impact. If parties could agree that options are limited, energy could be channeled toward improving the approaches that are most feasible, rather than wasting effort on championing those that are impracticable.

## **Projecting Outcomes and Evaluating Results**

Assessing which approaches are best should include evaluating their effectiveness and projecting outcomes. Starting with a clear definition of effectiveness will facilitate better discussions. As discussed under the section, Defining Success, population sizes are not static. They may increase, decrease, or remain stable. Independent of population size, population growth rate can be rapid, slowed, stable or declining. Discussants should clarify these nuances beforehand and decide if a decreasing growth rate constitutes success. External factors, such as percentage sterilized, number of tame cats and kittens removed, influx of newcomers, and extent of colony management, should be considered, but recognized as separate influences.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of different approaches should also include whether they are feasible. Despite how effective an approach appears in theory, if it is not feasible, obviously

it will not be successful, For example, some have argued that TNR programs lack the resources to sterilize enough cats to make a difference. However, one must consider whether adequate resources exist for alternative efforts. Resources required to trap and remove cats to shelters, sanctuaries or homes are great. Discarding one approach for another that lacks resources will most likely result in no action at all. Gary Petronik (1998) cautions, TTVAR (trap-test-vaccinate-alter-return) is not a panacea, but intelligent management is preferable to doing nothing.

The various actions proposed are:

- Eradication
- TNR/colony management

Adjunct strategies:

- Outlaw TNR
- Outlaw feeding

Other considerations:

- Location evaluation
- Enlist help from veterinarians
- Focus on the sources of ferals
- Education of the public and cat owners
- Collaboration

I summarize these approaches here and present pros and cons.

### **Eradication**

Wildlife advocates favor eradication strategies, which seem to offer complete and immediate elimination of risk to wildlife. The cats and the problems that go with them are gone, as well as the possibility of additional offspring. They propose that once the cats are removed, options include placing them in homes or sanctuaries, taking them to shelters, or simply destroying them. No one opposes non-lethal removal approaches. If every feral cat could be tamed and placed in a human home, no one would object. If people are willing and able, they can work with feral cats to try to tame them. However, as discussed earlier, this is a long-term endeavor that absorbs volunteer time and resources, and may be unsuccessful in the end. Many

ferals will never be happy indoors. Placing cats in sanctuaries has limitations on a large scale because of the land and funding required. No-kill shelters rarely accept feral cats; open admission shelters nearly always destroy ferals after the required holding period, if not immediately.

Removal approaches also require people to carry them out. TNR volunteers would not help with any removal effort resulting in harm to the cats. Colony caretakers who have formed bonds with the cats often interfere with eradication efforts. Wildlife advocates suggest that government employees such as Animal Control Officers should perform eradications, which would require public funding. Animal control agencies in many towns do not handle cats at all due to limited resources. Shelters in some states do not accept cats. Assuming this burden is difficult for these agencies already on limited budgets.

By one estimate, the cost for a shelter to keep a cat for the required holding time, destroy, and dispose of the body is \$125. At that rate, the shelter cost alone to eliminate 90 million feral cats would be \$11.25 billion, which does not include costs to hire, train, and pay enough Animal Control Officers to carry out the eradications, as well as sustain the effort indefinitely to maintain any progress achieved. Approaches that depend on public funding are unlikely to be successful. Public funding for any kind of companion animal needs – shelters, education, etc. – has always been minimal.

Protection for endangered wildlife from feral cats is not likely to be any higher on policy makers' agendas than help for feral cats. Many citizens are passionate about worthwhile causes they believe should receive higher priority on public funding agendas. However, many of these issues will remain unaddressed while waiting for tax dollars – leaving individual action as the

only practical option. It is often when people find out there is no help available for feral cats that they realize the only option is to take action themselves.

Another consideration is whether eradication would be effective, if adequate public funding did exist. A massive trap-and-kill campaign would initially reduce the number of free-roaming cats. However, if removal efforts are not on-going, populations will rise again due to newcomers and cats that are missed. Cats from surrounding areas may also make their way into newly vacated areas. Before long, populations will reach levels equal to or higher than prior to the removal effort. We have seen that eradication approaches used for over fifty years have failed, the result being feral populations spiraling out of control.

An additional obstacle is public sentiment. Surveys indicate the public opposes lethal eradication methods (Levy, 2003 p 45). Many Animal Control Officers themselves oppose extermination of healthy cats. People are often outraged if they learn of plans for eradication. They may sabotage removal efforts, rendering them unsuccessful. Patronik (1998) suggests that, when considering policy decisions regarding feral cats, we need to recognize the growing resistance to euthanasia as a way of controlling companion animal populations.

Additionally, wildlife advocates favor the elimination of feral cats with the thought that habitats would return to their original state. However, even if complete eradication were possible, it is questionable whether habitats would revert due to the many other environmental pressures. Although some insist that all alien species should be eliminated, doing so has proven difficult.

### ***Outlaw TNR***

Wildlife advocates work to pass laws to prevent the practice of TNR, under the assumption that eradication would replace TNR. However, as already discussed, eradication has limited feasibility and effectiveness as a long-term solution. Proposals to prohibit TNR colonies

on public lands ignore the fact that the cats will be there reproducing with or without TNR prohibitions. Attempts to prevent TNR, by threatening that it violates the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, raise the same questions. If TNR becomes illegal and sterilization efforts cease, without adequate resources to take over with removal methods, populations increase rapidly.

Efforts to pass anti-TNR ordinances require considerable time and energy that could be more productively directed toward working on the issue itself. Likewise, TNR proponent efforts to fight or reverse TNR prohibitions consume their time and resources, detracting from their primary purpose of sterilizing feral cats. Meanwhile, feral cats continue their prolific breeding. Anti-TNR laws erode volunteer commitment and responsibility that has developed. Another consideration, on a broader scale, is that these laws perpetuate the notions that cats have no value and do not deserve consideration – the same societal attitudes that have contributed to the existence of feral cats.

### **Outlaw Feeding**

Wildlife advocates also favor laws that prohibit feeding feral cats. The AVMA agrees, suggesting in their position statement that the public should be educated not to feed stray cats. A number of cities and towns have enacted ordinances that ban feeding feral or stray cats, including Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Clermont, Iowa; Ormond Beach, Florida; Portsmouth, Virginia; Grand Saline, Texas; Waukegan, Illinois; and many others. The Honolulu City and County Parks Department has banned feeding of stray and feral cats in all city parks.

However, outlawing or discouraging feeding will not eliminate feral cats or even significantly reduce their numbers. Population reduction due to decreased food supply, if any, is minimal relative to population increase due to reproduction. If one food supply is eliminated, the

cats will find another. In addition, feeding bans have a number of unintended consequences. Even where feeding is illegal, many people continue to do so secretly, believing it is wrong to allow the cats to suffer and starve. When the cats come around looking for food, people do not have the heart to refuse. Going under cover, people are less likely to seek sterilization services or work with local organizations. In addition, feeding is usually the first step to becoming involved in TNR. People begin by feeding, but soon realize the cats are quickly multiplying and become motivated to seek help for sterilization. As a community issue that requires broad scale efforts, outlawing feeding sends the wrong message. Members of the community need to take responsibility. Marginalizing those who want to help impedes possibilities for cooperation and collaboration. The AVMA itself points out that individuals here and there secretly feeding are not going to have any impact.

### **TNR / Colony Management**

In theory, both TNR and eradication could be effective if done extensively and continuously. However, while removal efforts often depend on public funding and government employees, TNR is entirely a volunteer effort, paid for with private funds. While the estimated cost for a shelter to hold, destroy and dispose of a feral cat is \$125, the cost of sterilization in a high-volume spay/neuter clinic is estimated at \$17 per cat. In addition, TNR has unlimited potential for increased resources through volunteer recruitment and funding campaigns.

A number of cases have demonstrated that TNR can successfully reduce colony populations, especially when combined with management, monitoring, and adoption programs. Published examples include the Levy 11-year study of feral cats on the University of Central Florida campus where the feral cat population decreased by 66% (Levy, Gale & Gale, 2003). The size of a colony studied at Texas A & M quickly decreased by 33%. The doctoral research of

Felicia Nutter included careful comparison studies on 12 colonies, which showed significantly reduced numbers in the TNR colonies and significantly increased numbers in the colonies with no intervention (Nutter, 2005). A now well-known population living along the Newburyport, Massachusetts waterfront went from several hundred cats to extinction (Slater, 2004).

Because reproduction of existing feral cats contributes more to feral population growth than any other factor, sterilization is the most effective non-lethal way to curb population growth. The TNR approach maintains sterilization as its primary focus because it has the most definitive outcome and the greatest impact. One can be certain that a sterilized cat will no longer contribute to population growth. Organizations that hold feral spay/neuter clinics and keep statistics, collectively report many thousands of cats sterilized nationwide. Many more sterilizations are not included in those statistics. Clearly, extensive sterilization has prevented many future generations that would otherwise have continued to contribute to population growth. Other contributing factors need consideration, but finding solutions for them is more difficult and the outcomes less certain.

While sterilization is the most expedient and direct method of slowing population growth, TNR results improve when there is ongoing monitoring by colony caretakers. The advantage of managed colonies is that someone is responsible for the location and the cats living there. If new cats arrive, they can be sterilized, and kittens and socialized adults can be removed and adopted into homes. Caretakers carry out these monitoring activities through regular daily feeding. The bonds caretakers develop with the cats create another level of commitment that does not exist with an animal control officer who might occasionally respond to complaints or check the area. Though not the same as living in a human home, nonetheless there is oversight for cats living in TNR colonies – a significant humane improvement over the alternative of the cats surviving on

their own. TNR volunteers bring passion and dedication to their efforts, donating time, energy and funds. If TNR were eliminated to be replaced by eradication, these volunteers and the benefits derived from their participation would be lost.

### **Location Evaluation**

In considering options, it is important to keep in mind the wide variation in circumstances of feral cats – ranging from endangered bird sanctuaries to parking lots where cats are eating out of dumpsters. Each location requires individual assessment to determine an appropriately tailored approach. Starting with the specifics of the particular location in mind will lead to better evaluation of strategies. Patronek (1998) suggests we need to recognize the differences in feral populations when considering policy decisions. When looking at locations, questions to consider might be, whether there is vulnerable wildlife, if there is a local TNR group, a caretaker, or if volunteers are available.

### **Veterinarians**

Because of the respect veterinarians receive on animal issues, they can have significant impact by learning about and becoming involved in TNR and feral cat issues. Veterinarians are essential for educating the public and performing sterilization surgeries on ferals in their own clinics and as volunteers.

### **Sources**

TNR is one of a number of angles from which we can approach the feral cat issue. In addition to reproduction of existing ferals, populations increase due to abandonment and offspring of unsterilized cats living in human homes. Many have said we will not solve the feral cat issue unless we address the sources of ferals. As long as people continue to abandon their cats, they provide an ongoing source of new ferals. Patronek (1998) suggests TNR alone will not

be adequate if emigration continues. However, preventative measures will not address current populations. In order to prevent feral cat populations from ever reaching their current proportions, we would have had to address the sources of ferals 50 years ago. Presently enough feral cats exist to sustain rapid population growth even without additional influx. No doubt, sources need consideration, but determining how to address them presents challenges.

### **Education**

Wildlife advocates suggest addressing the feral cat issue through public education campaigns, but they do not discuss whether this is feasible or if this approach would effectively reduce population growth (Winter, 2004). In addition, education will not affect existing feral populations. While education is important, changing human behavior is difficult. Seeing results would take much longer than TNR and require even greater patience. Public education campaigns are expensive, again raising questions of funding sources and most effective allocation of resources. The intensive effort required to perform TNR responsibly and effectively leaves little time for TNR groups to carry out extensive education campaigns. Nonetheless, the TNR efforts themselves have the effect of raising public awareness.

### **Collaboration**

The scale of the feral cat issue makes it a community concern. However, in some places, controversy has interfered with essential networking and collaboration between community groups. Influenced by opponents of TNR, communities may believe they should not support TNR. Wishing to avoid the conflict, local and state organizations and legislators may opt not to get involved. This lack of support for TNR may result in no action at all.

Of course, the TNR controversy also hinders collaboration between wildlife advocates and TNR proponents. Though wildlife advocates object to returning sterilized cats, they may

conclude that TNR is more effective than doing nothing. Thus even if they will not help with TNR efforts, they may realize that blocking TNR programs will likely undermine their own goals. In several locations, community members, wildlife advocates and TNR proponents have worked collaboratively to objectively weigh available options. They concluded that, given all the variables, TNR was the most productive approach.

One example of this is the San Francisco Bay community of Foster City, California, where feral cats were living in an area also inhabited by the California Clapper Rail. The Sequoia Audubon Society, the government of Foster City and the Homeless Cat Network collaborated and agreed that TNR would be the best approach to controlling the feral cat population. Beginning in 2005, 60 of the original 170 cats were adopted; the remainder were sterilized. Currently, feeding stations keep the cats away from nesting areas, The Clapper Rail and other migratory birds in the area are thriving

Another example is Stone Harbor, New Jersey, where wildlife advocates and TNR proponents were in a disagreement over feral cats living in a sanctuary for Piping Plovers, an endangered bird species. A local police officer, with the advice of Neighborhood Cats, a New York City TNR organization, facilitated collaboration among all parties; the result was an agreement to make TNR the official policy in Stone Harbor, and to relocate the cats to another part of town. Volunteers continue to monitor the wildlife sanctuary for new cats.

### **Science / Data**

Ample evidence now exists showing the circumstances under which TNR is most effective. We can use this knowledge to determine ways to improve the TNR approach. Existing TNR programs and studies can provide information to direct future efforts. Stakeholders can best

utilize data by considering its broader application, while taking into account the limitations of the results.

**Options Table:**

Trap/place	Unfeasible on a large scale
Trap/sanctuary	Unfeasible on a large scale
Trap/relocate	Unfeasible on a large scale
Trap/kill	Insufficient public resources Unacceptable to public
Outlaw TNR	Can result in no action thus more cats
Outlaw feeding	Does not help / inhumane Undermines access to feeders
Educate the public	Does not address existing cats Changing behavior takes time Expensive
Do nothing	Continued rapid population growth
Trap/Neuter/Return	Not perfect, but the most feasible thus the best hope

Enormous public policy issues are generally difficult and require a long time to solve. Never is this easy for impatient stakeholders to accept. Coming up with the best strategies requires a creative and holistic approach. Stakeholders often must make concessions they do not like in order to avoid paralyzing polarization. At times, it is necessary to accept imperfect approaches and recognize that any progress is better than no progress at all.

**2. Recommendations**

Having decided that all species warrant consideration, reaching agreement will require negotiation and compromise, as well as willingness to acknowledge practical limitations. Stakeholders need to think in terms of better or worse approaches rather than seeking perfect solutions. In this way, they will more quickly reach compromise and thus begin to make progress toward the common goal of fewer feral cats.

Eradication has been the strategy for many years, with unfavorable results. Returning to the same system under which the situation came about is counterproductive. If reality dictates that eradication is equivalent to doing nothing because it is not feasible, then, despite objections, it is better to have sterilized cats living in colonies than to allow reproduction to continue unchecked. Accepting this requires recognizing that any progress is an improvement over allowing the situation to become worse. Even a population increasing at a slower rate is improvement over uncontrolled growth.

### **Eradication**

Eradication strategies will generally not be the best option because of the significant drawbacks. Lack of resources and people to carry out removal efforts, as well as public opposition make eradication impractical. Even if it were feasible, eradication would not be effective over the long term because it is unlikely to be continued on an ongoing basis. Removal for taming and adoption, or relocation to sanctuaries, is not practical on a broad scale due to limited resources. Because of these disadvantages, in most cases, choosing an elimination approach is the equivalent of doing nothing and allowing population growth to continue unchecked.

### **Trap-Neuter-Return**

While eradication strategies seem to offer immediate results, taking into account broader realities and limitations, TNR offers the best hope for reducing feral cat populations. As an entirely volunteer effort, not dependent on public funding, TNR is the most feasible approach. TNR effectively reduces population growth, but TNR combined with colony management will achieve the best results. Unlike other approaches, caretakers of managed colonies provide ongoing oversight, a key component to the success of TNR.

TNR efforts rarely receive public funds; however, states that have enacted legislation to provide funding for low-income and feral spay/neuter have shown a reduction in shelter intakes and euthanasia. This type of funding may increase as jurisdictions realize that it is more cost-effective to direct funding in this manner than to use taxpayer money to hold, destroy and dispose of unwanted animals.

To recognize that there is no perfect solution and accept TNR as the best approach requires concessions on all sides. TNR proponents grapple with having to put cats back out into less than ideal circumstances. Wildlife advocates must accept the undesirable return of cats to the environment. The challenge for those who would prefer eradication approaches is to understand how TNR actually works more effectively toward their own goals. Doing so requires stepping back and taking a broader view. Looking objectively, one sees that the most effective approach is the one that is most feasible. The ineffectiveness of eradication has been made evident by the failure of its use over the last half century. We have seen there is nothing to be gained by insisting on trap and remove over TNR. So it makes more sense to accept the temporary presence of the existing cats, whose numbers are, in the end, insignificant relative to the numbers that will result from ongoing reproduction. Having accepted these realities, it is then possible to recognize that working to improve and expand TNR efforts will achieve better results than fighting to eliminate it.

### **Assessing results**

Ideally, TNR is optimized to have the greatest impact. However, it is important to keep in mind that sterilization of a colony to any extent will decrease population growth to some degree, depending on the percent sterilized. Any reduction in growth rate is progress, thus sterilization is never a waste of time. Stakeholders need to recognize that slowed population growth is an

improvement over increasing population growth; having fewer feral cats is better than having more. While impossible to measure something that does not happen, one has to consider how much a population might increase without TNR. Even if the population continues to increase somewhat, it will increase more slowly. Nonetheless, the goal should be to sterilize the entire colony for the most rapid decrease in population size.

### **Avoid undermining progress**

Undermining TNR in favor of removal should be avoided except in certain circumstances. If the cats are at risk or living near endangered species habitats then other non-lethal removal strategies such as relocation, sanctuaries, or placement can be considered. As volunteer organization networks expand and become more effective, non-lethal removal strategies may become more practical. Efforts to outlaw TNR and feeding of strays are also counterproductive. Putting a stop to TNR will not eliminate feral cats. People who are feeding are already motivated to help; good information about TNR resources should be readily accessible to them.

The energy and dedication of TNR volunteers and organizations already mobilized to work on the feral cat situation should not be squandered. Working with, rather than fighting, the existing body of committed volunteers will better serve the goals of all. As a community issue, requiring intensive broad scale effort and the work of many, we need to encourage any effort to work with the cats. We need more people who care and have the compassion and willingness to take action toward solving these problems.

### **Improving TNR**

Once we accept that TNR has the greatest chance of success, focus can shift to exploring ways to make TNR more effective and working to implement them. As long as reproduction

continues to be the primary source of population growth, to have the greatest impact on feral populations, TNR organizations need to maintain their focus on sterilization. As stated in the AAFP position on TNR:

“In order to meet the primary objective of reducing cat populations over the long term, programs should be organized to perform the largest number of sterilizations possible.”

In addition, because TNR is most effective when combined with colony management, TNR organizations should work to ensure sterilized cats are returned to colonies with caretakers. The ultimate goal should be to have every feral cat sterilized and living in a managed TNR colony.

Most important to the TNR effort is having strong TNR organizations and many volunteers. Organized groups that combine efforts have greater success than individuals working alone. Learning to build successful organizations should be a primary goal. Energy directed toward increasing the number and boosting the strength of organizations would maximize TNR efforts. Information provided by state and national advocacy groups can help organizations become more effective. Centralized networks can facilitate sharing of knowledge, to avoid “reinventing the wheel”. Expanding TNR networks beyond small local organizations will increase available resources. Greater organization and collaboration within the TNR effort will enable TNR coverage of more areas. This also makes standardized tracking systems possible facilitating goal setting and measuring effectiveness of TNR programs.

Effort should be made to create partnerships linking TNR and rescue groups with shelters, animal control, and local government. Rescue and foster care are labor intensive, but having collaborative networks for these functions lessens the burden. Cooperation between groups enhances the effectiveness of them all. As these partnerships become more widespread, they can

be built upon and serve as models to other communities. Even if public funds are unavailable, local officials can still back grassroots TNR efforts. If states or communities can provide funding, results will improve. Reducing feral populations can significantly decrease the cat population as a whole, lessening the burden on shelters and rescue organizations.

To increase the number of volunteers, it is beneficial to explore ways to recruit new volunteers and keep existing volunteers. The pool of potential volunteers is essentially unlimited. Many people are interested in helping animals and may be motivated to volunteer if they believe they can do something that matters and help make a difference. We should seek out those who are already feeding ferals and harness their motivation to help. Having many volunteers permits increased rescue, fostering and adoption of kittens and socialized adults, which will reduce populations more rapidly. Volunteers are also needed to ensure adequate availability of spay/neuter clinics for ferals.

Wildlife advocates already have in place extensive resources, organizations and volunteers, which they could use to contribute to the effort. People concerned about feral cat risks to wildlife could bolster the TNR effort by volunteering themselves. This is perhaps unlikely, but they could contribute in other capacities. For example, wildlife advocates have suggested removing ferals for placement in sanctuaries or taming them so they can live in homes. While not generally practical for TNR proponents due to limited time and resources, wildlife advocates could participate in such efforts. Wildlife advocates have emphasized getting to the source of the issue – an aspect they could work on. For example, they could conduct studies exploring the sources of feral cats. They have suggested education to change people's behavior, an avenue they could pursue. Wildlife organizations have the experience, networking and funding to make them well positioned to carry out effective public education campaigns.

From a humane standpoint, strengthening TNR will improve the quality of life of TNR colony cats. Some argue that killing feral cats is more humane than TNR because ferals in TNR colonies continue to suffer and risk dangers of living outdoors. However, while returning cats to their outdoor colonies may not be optimal, if we agree that TNR is really our only option, then the question becomes how to improve upon the care they receive. Stronger TNR organizations and more volunteers can improve the quality of care given to cats living in feral colonies.

### **The Role of Veterinarians**

If veterinarians are educated about the benefits of TNR, they can pass this information on in their interactions with the public. They need to understand how they can help prevent abandonment by educating clients and others about responsibility, behavior, and relationship issues with their feline companions. They should be made aware of how they can contribute by performing sterilizations on ferals at reduced rates in their own clinics or as volunteers in feral clinics. Increased involvement of the veterinary community would lessen the burden on individual veterinarians.

### **Other approaches**

Accepting that TNR will have the most direct impact on growing feral populations permits moving ahead to consider other options. While TNR is currently the most direct way to impact feral populations, sources of ferals must also be addressed. TNR combined with other approaches can improve outcomes. Public education campaigns can address possible causes of abandonment, such as poor cat-human bonding and “throwaway” attitudes toward cats. Increased resources for sterilization of cats living in human households will also help to reduce new influx into feral populations. However, as long as reproduction remains the greatest contributor to population growth, other approaches should not take precedence over sterilization.

## **Directing research**

Instead of continued attempts to prove or disprove the effectiveness of methods, particularly those that are not practical, careful analysis should determine where to direct study efforts for the most benefit.. Studies should be designed with parameters such that the conclusions are applicable to practical situations. Most useful would be further exploration of strategies to enhance the effectiveness of TNR management programs. Further study might investigate ways to incorporate the most effective strategies into TNR programs. Better TNR colony tracking systems would also provide useful data. From Foley, et al (2005):

“Statistical assessment of the impact of TNR programs on population size is critical to help gain credibility for such programs. Because of the increasing will to address humane, conservation, and public health concerns associated with free-roaming cats, tools to evaluate program success will increasingly contribute to achieving management goals.”

## **Sensitive locations**

Locations where there is serious concern about wildlife will require greater effort and attention. Stakeholders should avoid undermining the progress all desire by working at cross-purposes, pursuing individual efforts, and becoming embroiled in controversy. Heightened interest from both wildlife advocates and TNR proponents also means greater availability of parties to work on the situation. Wildlife advocates can play a significant role in these situations. As demonstrated in several cases, by working collaboratively, stakeholders can weigh practical considerations to determine the strategies most likely to succeed and thus more quickly achieve favorable results.

In short, enormous problems take a long time to resolve – a frustrating and discouraging reality. Given that TNR is the best hope, the focus should primarily be on improving the TNR approach so that it will more effectively decrease population growth rates, and ultimately reach

the point where overall colony sizes decrease. The knowledge we already have about what makes TNR most effective should be incorporated into TNR programs.

### **3. Implications**

Reducing populations through TNR has benefits on multiple levels. Having fewer cats reduces predation, which benefits nature, wildlife, and the environment. People benefit from a number of angles: nuisance factors decrease once cats are sterilized; people concerned about wildlife see danger to wildlife decreased; people concerned about the cats being killed are satisfied that that will not happen. The cats benefit because they are able to continue living in familiar surroundings, with suffering due to uncontrolled reproduction alleviated, and their quality of life improved.

Added benefits to TNR are as follows:

- individuals or groups of people become involved with feral colonies
- creates a sense of commitment and responsibility to that group of cats
- provides oversight of the colony
- provides concern for welfare – monitoring for those that are in sick or in need of vet care
- provides monitoring for kittens so they can be removed and placed
- provides monitoring for unsterilized newcomers so they can be spay/neutered.
- provides monitoring for socialized newcomers so they can be taken in by rescues.
- does not depend on public funding or government employees

In addition to the benefits of TNR already discussed:

Human involvement in feral colonies creates the possibility of communication with animal control and public health. If those agencies receive complaints, they have someone to call. There is some human accountability. TNR efforts not only control populations, but group fundraising and publicity activities have the added benefit of raising awareness of feral cats.

As we have seen, values influence the creation of policies. However, the inverse is also true: policies shape and inform values. Thus, creating policies rooted in values that animals matter further reinforces and encourages those values. In the case of feral cats, fighting to

prohibit TNR sends the message that the cats have no value, perpetuating the same societal attitudes that have lead to irresponsible behavior and feral cat population growth. Yet these are the very notions we are trying to dispel. In the broader view, rather than disdain and destroying feral cats, it is more productive to implement policies to help them, thus, reinforcing the notion that they matter.

Policies borne out of concern for feral cats will in turn increase the importance of the issue in people's minds. The existence of TNR efforts fosters the notion that we have a community responsibility to feral cats and we need to care for them, rather than leave them to fend for themselves. The net effect is that policies that heighten the societal level of responsibility for cats can have the desirable consequence of encouraging people to hold greater value for cats. All benefit when we embrace these cats as part of our communities and recognize our responsibility for their welfare.

Efforts to help feral cats not only help control populations, but also have the added benefit of raising awareness of feral cats, who are often hidden. Greater visibility of TNR programs causes people to think more about the consequences of abandoning their cats and the reasons they should not do so, thus encouraging them to behave more responsibly. The message that these cats matter discourages views of cats as "disposable pets", what the AVMA policy statement refers to as "irresponsible societal attitudes." Policies that encourage people to hold greater value for cats have the desirable effect of encouraging responsible behavior toward cats and convey the notion that it is not acceptable to discard them when they become an inconvenience.

Going forward, the animal protection, shelter, and rescue communities need to work toward greater understanding of the reasons that people give cats less consideration than dogs

and finding ways to improve these attitudes. I believe that understanding and enhancement of the bond between cats and their human companions would increase the value people hold for their feline companions.

Any effort to advocate for the well-being and alleviation of suffering of feral cats, wildlife, or other animals will help to improve societal attitudes toward all living creatures. These efforts raise the level of consideration for all beings, showing that we do not tolerate suffering as a society and we care for the innocent, the voiceless and those in need. To turn our backs on suffering harms us as well as those suffering. We create a healthier society by showing caring and compassion toward other living beings.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Although stakeholders in the feral cat controversy differ in many regards, they ultimately share the same desire to eliminate feral cats. They differ in their values, beliefs, feelings, and motivations. Differing worldviews have led stakeholders to have different opinions on how best to reach their shared goal of eliminating feral cats. In the controversy, the desire to be right has taken precedence over stakeholders' original goals, to the point that attacking and defending detract from the objectives of all. Factions are undermining their own goals without realizing it. Greater understanding of the underlying basis of each others' worldviews could help overcome some of the barriers to progress and permit collaboration between them.

In the end, realistic exploration reveals that TNR is the only feasible and practical approach. As a result it is also the most effective approach. At minimum, TNR reduces the rate of growth of feral populations. At best, TNR decreases populations to extinction. The result of having fewer cats is less suffering for cats and less wildlife killed. Consequently, efforts to undermine TNR detract from the objectives of all stakeholders. Accepting this reality requires

taking a step back and looking at the big picture taking all factors into account. What makes this issue unique is that one group of stakeholders – wildlife advocates – must accept what appears to them to be a step backwards (returning cats) in order to achieve the desired steps forward.

It also requires accepting the fact that difficult policy issues can take many, many years to resolve. Very few policy issues have perfect solutions. The best solution is often the most we can hope for. To throw out the best solution because it is not perfect is not productive. Often, as in this case, situations become untenable over many years and require many more to undo the damage. This requires being able to accept any improvement as progress when resolution may still be many years away.

### ***Silver Lining***

Controversies can be beneficial when they have the unintended consequence of being the catalyst for bridging differences and reaching new understandings. In addition, the protestations of wildlife advocates may motivate TNR proponents to think about ways to improve TNR and colony management programs resulting in more rapid decreases in feral cat populations. Understanding that TNR is the best option we have may encourage wildlife advocates to increase their support of TNR and become more involved. The controversy itself can potentially raise awareness of feral cats and TNR beyond the stakeholder communities.

### ***New Questions***

There is still much to learn about feral cats and feral cat management programs. More research on the sources of feral cats will lead to better approaches on that front – for example, the percentage of ferals that are feral offspring and percentage that are immigrants. To better address sources of feral cats, we need greater understanding of what leads people to abandon their cats. Patronek (1998) states “Resources and research should continue to be concentrated in

understanding and altering societal attitudes that produce unwanted cats.” A number of beliefs may contribute to the thinking behind abandonment – such as the belief that cats can fend for themselves and do not need humans. Perhaps people avoid shelters because of fear their cat will be destroyed. People may not think through or may not be aware of the responsibility they are taking on before adopting. The kitten that looks cute in the moment may fall prey to an impulsive decision. Also possible is that people perceive cats as being independent because they treat them in ways that effectively break the bond of trust, causing their cats to become indifferent. The cat-human bond based on trust resembles that of mother cat and kitten – the cat is very interactive and appears dependent; their human could not make the mistake of thinking they do not need care. Further exploration into the basis of these beliefs could lead to better ways to address them.

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# Appendices

## Stakeholder Groups:

- Feral Cats
- Wildlife
- Veterinarians:
  - Pro-TNR
  - Wildlife
- Veterinary Medical Associations:
  - AVMA - American Veterinary Medical Association
  - AAFP - American Association of Feline Practitioners
  - AVAR - Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights
  - AAV - Association of Avian Veterinarians
  - AAWV - American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians
- Animal Protection Organizations:
  - HSUS - Humane Society of the United States
  - ASPCA - American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- TNR Proponent Groups:
  - Alley Cat Allies
  - Feral Cat Network
  - Neighborhood Cats
  - SPAY USA
- Wildlife Advocacy Groups:
  - National Audubon Society
  - U.S. Fish and Wildlife
  - The Wildlife Society
  - American Bird Conservancy
- Public

## Documents Table

Category	Author/Group	Type	Title
Veterinarians pro TNR	Foley	journal article	Analysis of the impact
	Levy, Crawford	journal article	Humane Strategies
	Levy, Gale	journal article	Evaluation of the Effect
	Nutter	dissertation	Evaluation TNR Mgmt Program
	Patronek	journal article	Ferals: Impact on Wildlife/Humans
	Slater	journal article	Understanding Issues
	Slater, Shain	ed bk article	Feral Cats: An Overview

	Stoskopf, Nutter	journal article	Analyzing approaches
Veterinarians anti TNR	Andersen	journal article	Matrix population models
	Barrows	journal article	Professional, ethical, legal dilemmas
	Barrows	webpage	Discussion issues for TNR advocates
	Jessup	journal article	The welfare of feral cats and wildlife
	Jessup	journal LTE	Some Common Ground on Feral Cats
Veterinary Organizations	AVMA	position stmt	Free-roaming Abandoned and Feral Cats
	AAFP	position stmt	Free-Roaming Abandoned and Feral Cats
	AVAR	position stmt	Feral Cats and Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)
	AAV	resolution	Resolution on Free-roaming Cats
	AAWV	resolution	Resolution on Management of Feral Cats
Advocacy Organizations	HSUS	position stmt	Position statement: TNR
	HSUS, Slater	web article	Who's Ultimately Responsible for Free-Roaming Cats?
	ASPCA/Comings	web article	TNR: The Humane Alternative
	ASPCA	position stmt	Position Statement on Feral Cat Management
Pro-TNR Groups	Alley Cat Allies	web page	ACA:List of Factsheets and Articles (see ACA in Doc Lists folder)
	Alley Cat Allies	web article	ACA: About Us
	Alley Cat Allies	web article	Building the Body of Evidence: TNR Works
	ACA/N. Winograd	web article	Nathan Winograd: Ferals on the Firing Line
	Alley Cat Allies	web article	Understanding Cats and Predation
	Feral Cat Network	web article	Introduction
	Feral Cat Network	web article	Dispelling the Myths
	Neighborhood Cats	web article	TNR Resource
	SPAY-USA	web article	Feral Cat Policy
Anti-TNR	Nat. Audubon/Drennan	web article	Cats
	Nat. Audubon	resolution	Regarding Control/Mgmt Feral/Free-Ranging Domestic Cats
	Nat. Aud / Weisman	web article	Audubon Mag: The World Without Us
	Nat. Audubon	web article	Audubon/ABC: Cats Indoors!
	Nat. Audubon	web article	Reducing Threats from Cats

	US Fish & Wildlife	web article	Cats, Birds, Beach: Deadly Combo
	Hatley (to USFW) Hatley – Land Use Hatley – presentation	report journal article presentation	The Fur and Feathers are Flying
	The Wildlife Society	position stmt	Feral & Free-Ranging Domestic Cats
	Winter, Dir ABC Cats Indoors campaign	journal article	TNR Programs: The reality and the impacts
	Am Bird Conservancy	website	Cats Indoors Campaign
	Am Bird Conservancy	web brochure	Cats Indoors Campaign Brochure
	Am Bird Conservancy	web article	Human Attitudes & Behavior Regarding Cats
	Am Bird Conservancy	web article	“Managed” Cat Colonies: The Wrong Solution to a Tragic Problem
	Am Bird Conservancy	resolution	ABC Resolution On Free-Roaming Cats
	Am Bird Conservancy	pdf booklet	Impacts of Feral and Free-Ranging Cats on Bird Species of Conservation Concern
	Am Bird Conservancy	web article	Domestic Cat Predation on Birds and Other Wildlife
	Am Bird Conservancy	web article	City of Aurora, CO Cat Restraint Law
	Am Bird Conservancy	web article	Get the Facts about Cat Law
	Am Bird Conservancy	web article	The Great Outdoors Is No Place for Cats