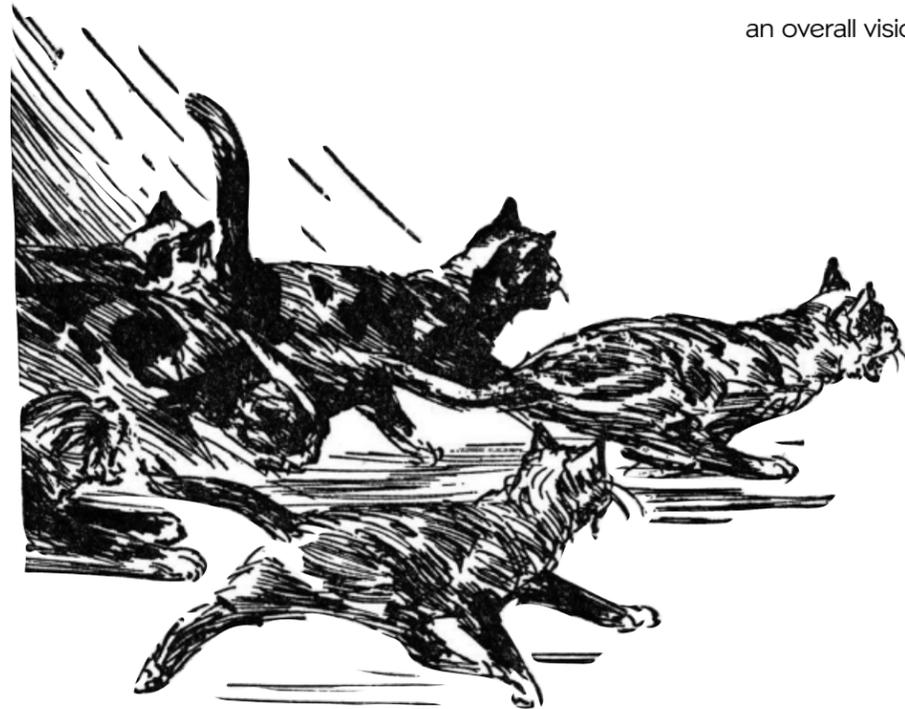


people about the impacts of cats on wildlife and is not designed to serve as a "Legal Bulletin." For information about statutes relating to release of non-native animals, contact FWC's Division of Law Enforcement. For information regarding possible violations of Florida's animal cruelty laws (which include abandonment), consult with your local animal control authority or humane society.

Education

Cats are domestic animals and people are responsible for them. The conduct of people as pet owners must change as well as their attitudes toward feral and free-ranging cats. A simple and effective step is to teach and encourage pet owners to keep their cats indoors. FWC supports the Cats Indoors! program of the American Bird Conservancy. Over 2,000 organizations have voiced their support for this program. At the core of this program is the simple message that indoor cats do not kill wildlife and they are healthier and live longer than outdoor cats.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FWC scientists do not view TNR and cat colonies as an appropriate method for dealing with cat overpopulation. Initiatives that include removal of feral cats from the wild, euthanasia or adoption, methods that reduce the flow of cats into the wild, and education that informs the public about cats and how to minimize their adverse impacts on wildlife are much better options. Feeding cats or establishing feral cat colonies on public lands that are used by wildlife is simply a bad practice, as is the release of cats elsewhere, if there is potentially an impact on wildlife species listed as endangered, threatened or of special concern.

Free-ranging and feral domestic cats can, and do, adversely impact Florida's native wildlife, including some threatened and endangered species. While feral and free-ranging cats are but one of many negative impacts to Florida's native wildlife, they are significant predators and their control should constitute part of an overall vision for wildlife conservation in the state.

IMPACTS OF FERAL AND FREE-RANGING DOMESTIC CATS ON WILDLIFE IN FLORIDA

Florida Fish And Wildlife Conservation Commission

INTRODUCTION

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) is descended from the wild cat (*Felis silvestris libyca*) of Africa and southwestern Asia. Wild cats were domesticated about 4,000 years ago. Domestic cats have been distributed worldwide and may be the most widespread terrestrial carnivore on earth.

THE MAGNITUDE OF CAT POPULATIONS AND THEIR IMPACTS ON WILDLIFE

Populations

The American Bird Conservancy estimates that, in the United States, 40 million owned cats spend some or all of their time outdoors and are free to prey on wildlife. The number of unowned cats is less well known but probably falls in the range of 40 to 60 million. Cats are extremely prolific, and feral cat numbers can grow quickly.

In some areas, large numbers of feral cats congregate in "cat colonies" where unowned cats gather at food sources provided by humans, such as garbage dumps or feeding stations. Cat colonies vary greatly in their status from simple aggregations of cats to colonies managed by volunteers. At the heart of most cat colony management is the practice of Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR). Using this management technique, cats are trapped and taken to a veterinarian or clinic where they may be tested for fatal feline diseases; if the cats test positive, they are usually euthanized. If the cats are too wild for adoption, the uninfected cats are vaccinated, spayed or neutered, permanently marked,



and then released back to the site where they were originally trapped. In theory, colonies are managed to eventual extinction in that an effort is made to capture, vaccinate, and sterilize all cats. However, in practice, many colonies are stable or increasing due to immigration and an inability to trap all cats. Therefore, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and many other groups (such as The Wildlife Society and the Florida Department of Health) do not view TNR as an acceptable practice for controlling cat populations.



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Predation

Domestic cats feed primarily on small mammals and, to a lesser extent, on birds. Cat



advocates often claim that well-fed cats pose little threat to wildlife.

However, cats are extremely flexible in food habits, and research shows that actual consumption of prey may decrease with food supplementation by humans, but cats continue to hunt and kill.

Predation by domestic cats has caused, or significantly contributed to, the extinction of many

animal species around the world, and in many areas, feral and free-roaming cats are a continual threat to endangered wildlife.

Cats often have advantages over native predators. Owned cats are protected from disease through vaccination, sheltered from predation, and protected from starvation by regular feeding. Some feral cats in colonies also may benefit from vaccination and feeding. Furthermore, cats with access to dependable food supplies are not as vulnerable to changes in prey populations. Domestic cats are not strictly territorial and can occur at densities much higher than those of native predators such as bobcat or fox.

According to The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, cats are the most common carriers of rabies among domestic animals. Unvaccinated cats can transmit rabies to wildlife such as raccoons, skunks, and foxes. Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) is a leading cause of death due to infectious disease in cats. There is one recorded instance of FeLV in the mountain lion, a close relative of the endangered Florida panther. Domestic cats were identified as one

of several possible reservoir hosts for feline pan-leukopenia which has been discovered in the Florida panther.

CAT POPULATIONS AND THEIR IMPACTS ON WILDLIFE IN FLORIDA

The estimated population of owned cats in Florida is approximately 9.6 million; the feral cat population of Florida may be 6.3 to 9.6 million. Based on a national average of 60 percent of all owned cats spending some or all of their time outdoors, the number of owned and feral cats, combined, that are outdoors and potentially preying on wildlife is likely in the range of 12.1 to 15.4 million.

Florida has cat colonies in at least 17 counties. The largest known colony has an estimated 1,000 cats.

These estimates and information suggest that there are millions of cats preying on wildlife in Florida. In Wisconsin, an estimated 1.7 million free-ranging rural cats kill an estimated minimum of 31.4 million small mammals and 7.8 million birds per year. Based on extrapolated data from Wisconsin, feral and free-ranging cats in Florida may be killing as many as 271 million small mammals and 68 million birds each year. Threatened and endangered wildlife species, including six subspecies of beach mice, Key Largo woodrat, Key Largo cotton mouse, Lower Keys marsh rabbit and Florida scrub-jay, are known or suspected to suffer losses as a result of predation by feral and domestic cats.

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH FERAL AND FREE-RANGING CATS

Because of their role in society as pets, people are emotionally and philosophically divided in their opinions of cats. A range of techniques to deal with cats as well as people will be necessary to reduce the toll cats take on wildlife.

Removal From the Wild

Complete removal of feral cats could be employed on small, isolated areas or islands in Florida. However, on developed islands and on the mainland, removal techniques must be continuously applied because of the constant stream of new cats that can arrive into control areas.

Cat Colonies and TNR

If TNR is to work as a method of cat control, all cats in colonies must be trapped, altered and released, immigration of new cats into colonies must be prevented, and cats must not harm wildlife in the vicinity of colonies.

However, a certain amount of immigration and reproduction is inevitable. TNR requires perpetual maintenance; new cats are free to enter the colony; cat colonies may inspire dumping of unwanted pet cats; and some cats simply resist trapping. In practice, many colonies remain stable or grow over time. Once cats are trapped, they may become "trap shy" and hence exceedingly difficult to trap and vaccinate again. The unusually high densities of cats and other wildlife that are attracted to the food provided can facilitate the spread of disease.

The health hazards associated with TNR also extend to humans. As a result, the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Inc. does not support TNR as a method of cat control and supports cat control through removal from the wild and responsible ownership, including keeping owned cats indoors. Similarly, the Florida Rabies Advisory Committee of the Florida Department of Health also advocates removal of feral cats. When feeding ceases, cat colonies disband, cat densities return to a level more easily tolerated by wildlife, and health hazards diminish.

Cat colonies and TNR are opposed by many groups including: American Bird Conservancy, American

Association of Wildlife Veterinarians, American Ornithologists' Union, Cooper Ornithological Society, National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Association of Avian Veterinarians, The Wildlife Society and the Florida Department of Health.

Reducing the Flow of New Cats into the Wild

Any effort to control Florida's cat problem should include measures to reduce the flow of new cats into the wild. Several steps can be taken at the municipal or county level, the level at which laws are typically implemented to control animals such as cats and dogs.

Suggestions include:

- Mandatory licensing and tagging of cats.
- Encourage all pet adoption programs to require new owners to spay/neuter their new pet and provide rewards for spaying and neutering (i.e., lower licensing fees).
- Enactment and enforcement of "leash laws" that require owners to restrict their pets to the owner's property unless under their direct physical control.
- Support passage and enforcement of local ordinances that prohibit abandonment and feeding of stray cats. Post warning signs in public areas set aside for wildlife announcing that feeding and cat colonies are illegal.
- Prohibit feeding of stray cats in public lands that serve as wildlife habitat.

Law Enforcement

FWC is charged with the regulation of wildlife, rather than domestic species, and therefore must necessarily depend upon county authorities with jurisdiction over domestics to ensure that these species are properly controlled. County authorities are urged to carefully consider the long-term negative effects of authorizing or sanctioning the release of domestic cats into urban and rural areas. This document is intended to inform