



# ***Forgotten Felines Rescue, Inc.***

Understanding the Feral Cat Problem  
and Commonly Proposed Solutions





***Q: Why do feral cats need the assistance of humans to look healthy and thrive while other wild animals thrive naturally, without human intervention?***

***A: Because feral cats are domestic animals, they are not wild animals.***

## Statistics

88 million cats are owned in the US (HSUS). Roughly 20% are acquired as strays, 20% are adopted from shelters/rescues and 10% are purchased from pet shops (NCPSP). 87% of owned cats are neutered while 13% of owned cats remain un-neutered (HSUS). Unaltered owned cats are the genesis of the homeless cat problem.

The NCPSP estimates that there are 70 million stray cats in the United States; 57% to 86% of these strays are feral, unadoptable, and/or unsocial cats ([www.petpopulation.org](http://www.petpopulation.org)).

## The Beginning of the Feral Cat Problem

Pregnant cats abandoned by their owners or that strayed away from home might survive in the streets, public parks, and parking lots when they have access to food via accessible trash or when they are fed regularly by cat lovers who take pity on them. When the weather becomes severe, the cats seek shelter in what often turns out to be dangerous places like under cars, under car hoods or in structures where they find openings.

When kittens born to stray cats have no direct contact with people, they become timid and fearful of humans after a few weeks in the outdoors. Within

a year, the kittens start having babies, marking the beginning of another feral cat colony. Members of the public complain about the smell of cat urine and the noise of fighting and mating cats. The cats will bite and scratch if handled, they most likely carry fleas, they do not always bury their fecal deposits, and their feeders do not always clear away uneaten food.

Some people see feral cats as a nuisance to their property or as a threat to wildlife and want them removed by any means necessary (South Dakota and Minnesota still allow feral cats to be shot), while others see them as cheap pest control. Some people see their suffering and want them trapped and brought to animal shelters to be euthanized, sparing them the terrible deaths they would inevitably suffer on the streets. Others focus on preventing the suffering of future generations and promote trapping, neutering, and releasing them back to their original location (TNR). Finally, others see feral cats as the most unfortunate felines, constantly facing hardships of homelessness, and deserving of indoor protected sanctuary, even though at the time of trapping many are far from adoptable.

## A Closer Look at Commonly Proposed Solutions

After birth control for humans became widespread in the 1960s, the contraceptive pill was then tested on stray cats and found difficult to administer. Neutering cats was established in the 1970s as an easier and cheaper way to control overpopulation. Other nice benefits produced by altering cats include healthier looking, better behaved cats, in large part because most cat fights are avoided when mating rituals disappear.

Nonetheless for years, the common way of coping with the feral cat problem was to either leave them alone or to trap and euthanize, since these unsocial cats were unwanted by potential pet owners. Neither of these solutions fixed the problem. Leaving them alone allowed them to reproduce and multiply at alarming rates. Conversely, when they were trapped and euthanized, if the food source (such as trash put out) remained, other stray and feral cats could migrate to the area.

The TNR movement began in England in the late 1970s and got a foothold in the US during the 1990s. It has gained speed over the last 10 years through a massive marketing and education campaign. The justification for TNR is that since neither leaving the feral cats alone nor trapping and euthanizing ended the problem, it's time for a more humane alternative. For a time, TNR was promoted as a way to "end the cycle of suffering," in that by spaying and neutering and then returning the cat to its original location, additional kittens/cats would be spared the horrible life and death brought by homelessness. Yet it wasn't until after a more positive rationale was given—that feral cats in a managed colony enjoy healthy, long lives in the outdoors, and that they would be unhappy living indoors since they are wild animals—that the movement really took off. But are these assertions actually true?

When feral cats are part of a TNR managed colony, they do better than when left to their own devices. Spaying and neutering cats tends to make them calmer and they fight less often, and unwanted litters are prevented. Additionally, getting fed regularly typically increases their life span. Simply surviving longer in poor or uncertain circumstances, however, is not truly a humane solution. For instance, is it compassionate to leave feral cats outside to live

in harsh elements? Truly wild animals instinctively den-up or hibernate, while feral cats typically search for relief in precarious places. While feral cat colony caretakers mean well, the cats in their care may be suffering and/or in danger. The deaths of feral cats typically occur in horrific ways and out of sight of their caretakers.

### *Some unintended consequences of TNR*

- It is becoming common for cat rescue people to TNR social cats, because shelters and rescue groups are full.
- Colony sites with a regular food supply encourage irresponsible pet owners to abandon their unwanted cats at those sites.
- Generally, the most diligent caretaker doesn't have the ample time or resources required to trap each additional cat as it enters a colony, especially if the colony is large and reproduction still occurs.
- Unless a caretaker is able to give unlimited time and resources, too often cats in a managed colony end up with untreated cuts, puncture wounds, or upper-respiratory ailments, all of which are easily treated. Yet they are likely to become serious, life threatening infections if unattended.
- Since outside feral cats tend to hide when severely sick or critically injured, the caretaker is unable to trap to provide veterinary care when it's most needed.
- Wild animals are attracted to food stations, and cats are subject to fighting, fatal injuries, and disease.
- Often food stations are not maintained well enough to keep ants, flies, and maggots off the food.
- Cats are still subject to hit and runs, attacks by other outside animals, and harm by mean-spirited people.
- During extreme weather, the caretaker may be unable to get to the food station to provide food.
- When makeshift shelters are provided by the caretaker, they may get vandalized or stolen from the site, if complaints of unsightliness don't cause a problem first.
- Colony sites too often put the cats at risk because the land is eventually needed for construction, etc., or because members of the public complain.

## FFRI's Solution: Trap Neuter and Provide Sanctuary (TNPS)

Many animal advocate groups such as PETA believe that TNR programs are acceptable as long as the cats are 1) isolated from roads, people, and animals who would harm them; 2) constantly tended to by people who not only feed them but care for their medical needs; 3) located in an area where they do not have access to wildlife; and 4) lodged in an area where the weather is constantly temperate.

These conditions are impossible to meet through TNR and, in fact, are best met by a controlled sanctuary.

FFRI believes that trapping, neutering, and providing indoor sanctuary with protected outside access when feasible is the most logical and humane solution for feral cats, as long as the caretakers research and obey municipal laws and stay within their financial means. Though TNPS is the least common solution, it is actually easier and less stressful than TNR, because the cats are on your property. They are convenient for you to feed, you are assured they are safe, you enjoy peace of mind during bad weather, and it will be easier to provide them with veterinary care when they need it. Providing sanctuary may include letting the cats live in a structure on your property, bringing them into a designated area of your home, such as a basement, or you may allow them to roam freely in your home.

Feral cats prefer a comfortable, safe indoor life to a lifelong experience of homeless perils. This is because feral cats are domestic animals that just act wild, apparently as an instinctive defense mechanism to aid in their survival; they are not wild animals. In contrast to wild animals such as squirrels, raccoons and skunks, cats are ill-equipped to survive on their own. Feral cats do not thrive in the woods where there is no human existence. Stray and feral cats form colonies around human food sources, such as open trash containers or dumpsters.

Since feral cats relax best in the company of other feral cats, never rescue just one. Feral cats will warm up and bond with you given time; there are no age constraints to socialization. Please see FFRI literature, Providing Sanctuary Qs and As, Tips on Humane Cat Trapping, and FFRI Purpose and Goals, for additional information.

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