

How Do Free-Roaming and Feral Cats Impact Humans and Wild Animals?

JAVMA Review Considers Whether TTVAR Programs Are Feasible and Humane

As the problems faced by feral cats gain the attention of more and more shelters—and as the problems posed by feral cats garner greater public attention—researchers are beginning to take a closer look at the impact these animals have on the communities they inhabit.

by free-roaming cats, rabies is the most worrisome from a public policy standpoint. Although there have been no human deaths in the United States attributed to rabid cats, the disease is diagnosed in cats more often than in any other domestic animal. In fact, health officials often oppose TTVAR programs because of rabies concerns and the enormous costs of postexposure treatment. Most TTVAR programs vaccinate cats against rabies only once, and some evidence shows that the mere presence of a colony may be inviting to rabid cats who can quickly spread the disease.

■ Among the other zoonoses of concern are plague, which has been spread from rodents to cats to humans; toxoplasmosis, which has been spread by free-roaming cats soiling water sources; and Lyme disease, which has been spread by infected ticks brought into the home by free-roaming cats.

■ Many people believe free-roaming and feral cats hunt and kill an enormous number of songbirds and other wild animals, but few studies indicate any long-term effects, and many provide evidence to the contrary. According to Patronek, humane agencies need to continue urging people to keep cats indoors for the safety of the cats and potential prey, but data seem to support the idea that TTVAR programs can be run without endangering populations of birds and other wild animals. (Of course studies that focus on

populations of animals tend to overlook the suffering that may come to individual birds and other wild animals, but a well-run TTVAR program aims to provide a humane solution for the greatest number of individual animals by eliminating feral colonies through attrition). In fact, according to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Study performed in the 1970s, 196 million bird deaths, or 1.9 percent of avian mortality, could be attributed to human activities, whereas cats accounted for only 3.5 million bird deaths, a relatively negligible amount. Most of these deaths were limited to a few species of birds, all of which maintained large populations.

Another study performed on an island with “closed” populations found that up to 30 percent of sparrow deaths were due to cats (who primarily fed on smaller rodents). But the sparrow population had returned to its previous level by the study’s end. According to the study’s author, even if the cats had been removed, another predator would have likely stepped in and preyed upon the same population. In another study, cats had quite an impact on vole populations, but once the small rodents became scarce, cats sought different species and vole popula-

tions soon rebounded. In urban areas the impact upon other animals is even less drastic, as few free-roaming cats hunt live prey, choosing instead to live off of refuse or food provided by humans.

■ In certain areas, under the proper conditions, TTVAR programs can be one part of a responsible approach to solving the problems posed by free-roaming and feral cats. Even this approach will fail, however, unless pet owners keep their own cats indoors to keep the colonies’ numbers from increasing. Any group considering a TTVAR program must tailor an approach to the specific needs of the community because colonies differ from climate to climate, and from urban areas to suburban and rural areas. Managed colonies should not be maintained near wildlife breeding areas, zoos, or habitats that are home to endangered species. In addition, to minimize the risk of zoonoses, managed colonies must be kept away from water supplies, public parks, and gathering places. Meanwhile, animal-welfare groups must find a way to measure the health and well-being of free-roaming cats, a subject of often debated, though few published studies have yielded reliable or conclusive data. —SK



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The *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA)* recently published a review of previous studies that may help shelters and public officials reach more well-informed policy decisions. The review, entitled, “Free-roaming and feral cats—their impact on wildlife and human beings,” evaluated the feasibility of trap-test-vaccinate-alter-and-release (TTVAR) programs, one of the more widespread proposals for controlling, decreasing, and eventually eliminating feral cat colonies.

Author Gary Patronek, VMD, PhD, pored over past research on the topic and arrived at the following conclusions:

■ Of the more common zoonotic diseases spread

For a complete copy of “Free-roaming and feral cats—their impact on wildlife and human beings,” ask your local library for the January 15, 1998, issue of *JAVMA* (Vol. 212, No. 2, pp. 218-226); contact the AVMA at 800-248-2682; or write Dr. Patronek at Tufts University School of Medicine, Center for Animals & Public Policy, 200 Westboro Rd., North Grafton, MA 01536.