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Trap, neuter, return programs make feral-cat problem worse

By Ted Williams | Guest columnist

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Feral cats are maintained in the wild by a dangerous, cruel, and illegal practice called trap, neuter and return. After these unfortunate animals are re-abandoned they are regularly fed, which draws more feral cats and encourages more re-abandonment.

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One intact male can impregnate dozens of females, so trying to reduce cat populations by TNR is like, well, herding cats.

It's dangerous — because feral cats are reservoirs for disease. Three studies reveal that 62 percent to 80 percent carry toxoplasmosis. Feral cats are now the most common domestic rabies vector. In Florida, where rabid cats attack people, the state Department of Health warns that TNR "is not tenable on public health grounds because of the persistent threat posed to communities from injury and disease." A TNR colony at Point Pleasant Beach, N.J., was removed because rabid cats were biting children.

It's cruel — because feral cats lack vet care and suffer from injuries and the same diseases they spread. They infect lynx, bobcats and endangered Florida panthers with feline leukemia, distemper and an AIDS-like immune-deficiency disease.

It's illegal — because feral cats kill migratory birds and endangered species such as honeycreepers in Hawaii and lower keys marsh rabbits and silver rice rats in Florida. But the Interior Department lacks the spine to back its law-enforcement agents who want to prosecute TNR practitioners. Free-ranging cats have driven at least 33 bird species to extinction.

Four years ago when I interviewed Elizabeth Parowski of Alley Cat Allies for my column in Audubon magazine, she informed me that the American Bird Conservancy had been way off in its estimate of 500 million birds killed annually in the U.S by free-ranging cats.

She was right. In January 2013 the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute released a study showing that the real figure is somewhere between 1.4 billion and 3.7 billion birds a year and for wild

mammals between 6.9 billion and 20.7 billion.

Arguing against euthanasia, Parowski asserts that "feral cats will keep other cats from moving into their territories." I get the same line from every TNR outfit I consult, along with "cats stop killing when their stomachs are full." Rubbish.

Cats kill by instinct. And if cats were territorial, they wouldn't form colonies.

"TNR is like a religion," remarks Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife biologist Fern Duvall, who gets death threats for such statements. "You can't sit down and reason with most of these people." Facts are dismissed, data denied, suffering of wildlife and cats ignored.

For example, the official policy of the No Kill Advocacy Center of Oakland, Calif., is that feral cats must be protected as "healthy wildlife." The Santa Monica-based Voice for the Animals Foundation actually stocks feral cats.

There are two effective, humane alternatives to the cat hell of TNR. One is Tylenol (the human pain medication) — a completely selective feral-cat poison. But the TNR lobby has blocked its registration for this use. The other is trap and euthanize. TE is practiced by state and federal wildlife managers; but municipal TE needs to happen if the annihilation of native wildlife is to be significantly slowed.

For my Audubon assignment, I inspected three odiferous feral-cat feeding stations in Honolulu. Scrawny, gimpy, semi-hairless, cloudy-eyed and single-eyed feral cats padded over rooftops, crouched, slunk and crunched kibbles. Dining with them were mongooses, another alien scourge sustained by TNR.

An otherwise literate professor who helped maintain the colony at the University of Hawaii bragged to me that TNR had worked because over the past decade, 80 percent of the feral cats on campus had been sterilized. In the same breath he estimated the current population at 400.

Ted Williams is editor-at-large for Audubon magazine.

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