

Ordering the Feral Cat: Stakeholder Perspectives on Cat Overpopulation

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Abstract

This paper discusses the historical and cultural ways in which people attempt to order the domestic cat both spatially and conceptually, with special attention to how this ordering influences perceptions of feral cats. Feral cats are unowned or semi-owned and live entirely unconfined to a home, making them a large focus of debate regarding the cat's overpopulation. There is little agreement on how to classify feral cats, whether they pose a problem, and what to do about it if they are a problem. This research documents the positions taken by different Columbus-based stakeholders regarding feral cat population issues. I conducted interviews with representatives of local organizations and analyzed materials on their websites in order to understand what stakeholders identify as the problem with feral cats and the solutions they view as most appropriate. From these data, I identify four discrete stakeholder positions, each of which contains valid and legitimate perspectives about domestic cats and, more generally, the role of animals in the urban environment: *feral Autonomy*, *cat abandonment*, *nuisance animal*, and *wildlife conservation*. When compared, the ways in which these positions differ highlight the points of controversy surrounding the impacts of cats outdoors, the 'wild' characteristic of ferals, what qualifies as humane treatment, and what methods of control are most effective. Likewise, the ways in which these positions overlap provide the grounds for tendering a hypothetical way forward for stakeholders to work collaboratively at education campaigns, legislative adjustments, allocating funds for affordable spay/neuter programs, reducing cat abandonment, and managing feral/stray cat colonies.

Keywords: feral cat, domestic cat, geographic imaginaries, urban environment, human-animal relationships, discourse, overpopulation, and stakeholders.

Introduction

In the United States the domestic cat facilitates a wide range of relationships with humans, such as being a feral, stray, street, barn, free-roaming, indoor, and/or pedigree cat, which makes it a highly ambiguous object both conceptually and biophysically. The unique characteristics of the cat's taxonomy and domestication highlight how many of the standard orderings and assumptions we use to set domesticated animals apart do not always apply to the domestic cat. This is true in conceptually ordering the cat as well as spatially ordering it within the context of urbanization and natural conservation efforts. During the 1900s, human interactions with and perceptions of animals in general began to change, which reflects how the domestic cat came to be viewed predominantly as a companion pet and an invasive species. In what follows, I outline how approaches to ordering the domestic cat according to particular human intentions are fundamentally divisive and controversial, and put forth that these orderings need to be reconsidered. I show that the domestic cat in the controlled and structured urban environment has become a source of polemic debate encompassing a myriad of human/nature and wild/domestic distinctions.

Feral cats have long been a source of tension simply because they are viewed and valued very differently by the various stakeholders involved in the discourse. For example, these cats can be seen as urban wildlife, as reservoirs of disease, as abandoned pets, as unnatural predators, and as a disruptive nuisance to residential life. The stakeholders include veterinarians, residents, feral cat caretakers, birders, wildlife conservation agencies, animal shelters, city pounds, animal control companies, pet owners, and the Humane Society, as well as other non-profit and non-governmental organizations. Because feral and stray cat numbers in urban settings, like Columbus, continue to grow, overpopulation has become a common concern. While these local

stakeholders share agreement on the issue of cat overpopulation, they hold very different positions on the best methods for reducing their numbers.

The purpose of my research was to document the positions taken by local stakeholders in the discourse on the feral cat and cat's overpopulation. The starting point for this endeavor was to better understand what stakeholders identify as the problem with feral cats, the concerns they have for them and the solutions they view as most appropriate. In doing so, I researched eight Columbus-based non-profit and non-governmental organizations, interviewed representatives from two local animal control/removal corporations over the phone, and conducted face to face tape recorded interviews with four local caretakers of feral cats, three local non-profit and non-governmental organizations, and the Ohio Division of Wildlife. I then sought to represent these different perspectives, through the lens of critical geography, to demonstrate how each contributes to the controversy embedded in the feral cat and cat overpopulation discourse.

In compiling and analyzing the information obtained through interviews and literature reviews, I observed four discrete positions taken on the feral cat/cat overpopulation issue. These positions are discussed further in reference to background information as well as four distinct attitudes taken regarding human-animal relationships more broadly. The ways in which these positions differ are discussed as the points of contention in the present debate about feral cats and how best to address the cat's overpopulation. In summary, the ways in which these positions are similar and overlap provide the grounds for tendering a hypothetical way forward.

Overall, this research attempts to represent the perspectives of various stakeholders in a way that demonstrates their legitimacy and validity by articulating four unique positions taken on the feral cat and the cat's overpopulation. Each position deserves careful consideration and

critical evaluation with respect to how the domestic cat is conceptually and spatially order in light of the historical, cultural, and environmental issues underpinning these perspectives. By cautiously assessing these positions juxtaposed together with relevant contextual information, greater intellectual empathy can be attained by all constituents regarding the array of different opinions and the emotional climate more generally enmeshed in this discourse.

Background

The Feral Cat

The feral cat is especially an object of interest because it is the most transgressive and contentious form of the domestic cat. While definitions of the feral cat can vary considerably, there are two that embody the same distinctions used to classify the domestic cat in terms of how it relates to humans and the places it inhabits. The first is any cat that is unsocialized with humans, cannot be handled and is unsuitable for life in a home (Slater, 2005). The second is any unowned cat, regardless of its socialization status, which is free-roaming and unconfined (Levy & Crawford, 2005). For this paper I wish to combine these two definitions to identify a feral cat as any descendant of the domestic cat that avoids human contact and lives freely outdoors, unconfined to a home.

When three or more adult feral cats are found to live and feed within close proximity around a single food source, they are called a feral cat colony (Slater, 2005). These colonies can be completely independent of human provisions or as is more likely the case, can be given food or shelter by a local ‘caretaker’ on a regular basis (Robertson, 2007). Caretakers are generally considered semi-owners of feral cats and provide a range of services involving feeding, sheltering, spaying/neutering, vaccinating, microchipping, and additional veterinary care

(Toukhsati, Bennett, & Coleman, 2007). Generally, if a colony has been controlled by trap-neuter/spay-return (TNR) or trap-test-vaccinate-alter-return (TTVAR) programs, it is considered to be ‘managed’ (Robertson, 2008). In a 2003 report, it was estimated that about 44% of the USA’s cat population is considered to be semi-owned, with an unknown percentage of households nationwide participating in semi-ownership behavior (like feeding) toward unowned outdoor cats (Slater, 2005).

Since feral cat populations are relatively undocumented and unregulated, the exact numbers of feral cats living in the U.S. is unknown. However, nationwide estimations range from between 30 to 45 million (Slater, 2005). In central Ohio, as of February 16, 2011, the Colony Cats and dogs non-profit organization approximated 1 million to live in the region. Depending on the location, some cats may have been introduced to permanent life outdoors intentionally (as a means of controlling vermin), but in general the source of feral cats is understood to be human neglect. The result of this neglect is seen in the growing number of feral kittens being born every year, both by feral and stray mothers, impregnated by itinerant intact males. The prolific number of cats populating the city (as well as rural areas), has become a serious problem for many stakeholders in the feral cat debate, even for those that accept feral cats as a ‘natural’ part of the urban environment. This general consensus concerned with the rising number of domestic cats in the U.S. is expressed as a problem of overpopulation, especially in urban settings.

The Domestic Cat

Before addressing the predicament of the domestic cat’s overpopulation, there are a number of things to consider regarding the background of the domestic cat in general. In fact, the domestic cat is highly ambiguous and very difficult to talk about without somehow making

distinctions between the ubiquitous types of domestic cats. As we will see, this is in part because there is no precise domestic cat (conceptually or physically), but rather convoluted variations between which people try to distinguish. The most common way of delineating different kinds of domestic cats is in terms of how they interact with humans and where they are found to be living. While these discriminations are particularly constructive in addressing specific concerns regarding the cat's overpopulation, they place the feral form of the domestic cat in a most precarious position, where perspectives of these animals are most assorted and ambivalent, warranting them the topic of this study.

The reasons behind the ambiguity of the domestic cat stem from a number of essential and inimitable characteristics that occlude many of the standard assumptions and orderings used to distinguish domesticated animals. These characteristics can be very instrumental in understanding why the domestic cat is so elusive, as well as why we feel it is necessary to sort them according to their relationship to humans and the places they inhabit. The attributes I wish to talk about specifically are the cat's taxonomy and biogeography. These two distinctive aspects are especially important for understanding the uniqueness of the domestic cat because they incorporate a historical and spatial context into the present day discourse concerning feral cats.

Taxonomy and Domestication

The domestic cat is believed to have undergone a process of self-domestication similar to that of the dog, where it gradually split from its wild ancestors by way of natural selection (Lipinski, 2008). Another contemporary theory circulated about the cat's domestication exists, involving people deliberately taming cats by way of artificial selection and breeding, but is usually considered implausible since such a demanding effort would have had little to no reward.

The divergence is thought to have taken place as cats occupied the surrounding areas of human settlements, becoming increasingly tolerant of human presence and adroit to hunting the vermin drawn to those areas. As excellent ratters, it is believed that over time cats were welcomed as a means of mitigating rodent populations, meaning that their incipient relationship with humans as a domestic animal was commensal or mutualistic in origin.

While this process of domestication is similar to that of the dog and perhaps other domesticated species, there are a number of unique qualities to the cat's domestication that significantly set it apart from the rest. One of these aspects is that with the exception of lions, felines evolved as solitary predators and do not possess a pack-orientation characteristic of almost all other domesticated species (Bradshaw, Goodwin, Legrand-Defrétil, & Nott, 1996). This lack of a social survival strategy, or pack-mentality, demonstrates why the domestic cat isn't subservient or submissive to human domination and in light of how the domestic cat has retained its ability to survive on its own apart from human intervention, these unique characteristics challenge conventional assumptions about what makes domesticated animals different from wild ones.

Another unique feature of the cat's domestication is that it has undergone only minor evolutionary changes in this process, which has resulted in the domestic cat exhibiting very similar behavior and form as its relative the Wildcat, *Felis silvestris* (Lipinski, 2008). In fact, a study conducted in 2007 revealed that the lines of descent of all domestic cats can most likely be traced back to approximately five self-domesticated African Wildcats, *Felis silvestris lybica*, that date back to circa 8000 BC. This study in modern phylogenetics, which analyzed morphological data and molecular sequencing data, has brought the domestic cat to be scientifically

reconsidered as a subspecies of the Wildcat, with the name *Felis silvestris catus* (Driscoll, Macdonald, & O'Brien, 2009).

As a subspecies of the Wildcat, the domestic cat shares ranking with the Chinese Mountain Cat, *Felis silvestris bieti*, as well as of course its ancestral origin the African Wildcat (also a subspecies). These three derivative subspecies can readily interbreed with one another, as well as with other small-bodied members of the genus *Felis*, like the Asian Jungle Cat, *Felis chaus*, and the Arabian Sand Cat, *Felis margarita*. In addition, these wildcats possess many of the same natural characteristics and behaviors that may have preadapted the domestic cat for domestication, namely their relatively high intelligence, love of play, social nature, obvious body language, and small size, as well as a penchant for tameness (Cameron-Beaumont, Lowe, & Bradshaw, 2002). Nevertheless, Carolus Linnaeus first classified the domestic cat as a discrete domesticated species, *Felis catus*, in his 1758 tenth edition of *Systema Naturae*, which remains the most common name used in literature to classify the domestic cat.

These attempts at biologically and conceptually ordering the domestic cat according to particular taxonomic criteria reflect a long held human tradition of drawing distinctions about the natural world. Mansfield describes this occurrence as people “making culturally inflected distinctions about biophysical things, including organisms and environments” (2003, pp 339). Mansfield goes on to explain how within the cultural context of certain sets of meanings, people often draw “common sense” distinctions (and non-distinctions) about environments and organisms. These distinctions are then used to describe how certain things are similar or nothing alike, such as wild versus domesticated animals.

The implication of these unique attributes about the cat's domestication and taxonomy is that the domestic cat defies many of the "common sense" orderings and assumptions used to separate domesticated animals. Because the domestic cat is not a distinct biological species, does not submit to humans as an alpha figure, does not fulfill a particular human purpose nor inherently depend on humans for provisions of food and shelter, it obfuscates the wild/domesticated distinction. As Griffiths, Poulter and Sibley put it, "cats are transgressive, breaking the boundary between nature and culture" (2000, pg 58). In stating this, the authors elucidate how in modern western societies, it is expected that cats retain some of their wildness or independence, indicating that their domestication is partial. Adding to this, they assert that while calling a cat a 'pet' signifies that it belongs to a home their containment to the domicile is usually incomplete, since many owners let their cats in and out of the home frequently.

However, the fact that the domestic cat is still commonly called *Felis catus* and considered distinctly separate of the Wildcat, evinces how greater cultural significance is placed on its contextual relationship to humans, than on the cat's intrinsic similarity to its non-domesticated and not-so-distant relatives. Yet because the mercurial domestic cat doesn't fit neatly within the wild/domestic division, other differentiations are often used regarding the type of relationship it exhibits with humans. Demarcation as being owned or unowned is a common distinction reflecting human tenure and possession as essential. Another is that of being tame or wild, which reflects the importance of how an animal responds to human interaction (but also presents irony: a wild domestic cat?). Similarly, distinctions are made about the cat's disposition to humans, either that of being companionable (seeking human affection) or reclusive. Lastly, a diversification is often used in deeming the cat as socialized or unsocialized to humans, the latter meaning feral.

Biogeography and Invasiveness

Linked to the array of human-animal relationships used to conceptually order different varieties of domestic cats is the wide range of habitats that they can be found living in, as represented in their biogeography. In simple terms this means the distribution of the domestic cat through space and time at multiple spatial and temporal scales. As a domesticated animal, it seems tacit that its distribution would be linked intimately through time and space with that of humans, which it is. For this reason the domestic cat is considered a cosmopolitan species, signifying that it can be found almost anywhere in the world. According to the Global Invasive Species Database (GISD, 2005), this is because during the 18th and 19th centuries, cats were taken and introduced to many parts of the globe by humans as a way of controlling rodent populations in establishing colonies as well as on rat infested ships. As a result, the domestic cat has adapted to living in almost any natural environment like forests, tundra, grasslands, coastal areas, scrublands, agricultural land, and wetlands, as well as artificial environments like urban areas, industrial zones and metropolitan parks.

The urban environment, defined broadly as the space of collective human residency, is especially important, because it can be seen as the original home of the domestic cat. As stated earlier, the domestic cat is believed to have derived from the emergence of human settlements and the ensuing niche created by human social activities. In addition, because of its utility in keeping populations of disease transmitting vermin down, the skillful domestic cat served an integral role throughout history in the growth of European cities domestically as well as in the founding of western colonies abroad. Though it is unclear to what extent cats were permitted or desired in the domestic realm (i.e. sleeping quarters, house, or streets), the cogent relationship was and is one grounded in the urban landscape.

However, this aspect of the domestic cat is often eschewed in present day discourses regarding concerns affiliated with the domestic cat's overpopulation. This is because the domestic cat's predation has become less important (since abating rodent populations is seen as obsolete), and even disadvantageous in light of their colonial proliferation. In addition, people living in the city have become increasingly fastidious about what they view as suitable for urban life (Wilbert & Philo, 2000). To illustrate this point, I consider the history of animals in the urban environment and critically analyze the concept of the domestic cat as an invasive and exotic species.

Starting in the 1830s, the rise of urbanization had a profound impact on how people interacted with animals and how they were perceived in American culture. While the presence of bucolic animals in the city was quotidian throughout the 19th century (with herds of pigs and cattle, as well as horses providing transportation), the 20th century marked a gradual fading of these animals from the urban landscape (Russow, 1989). According to Russow, this diminution of utility animals associated with farming from the city was matched by a burgeoning presence of both pets and zoos. Russow asserts that "as people began to confront dogs and cats as 'simply there' rather than instruments for hunting, herding, or catching mice, their perceptions changed" (1998, pp 31). The author explains that when something is "simply there," it becomes something that is observed disinterestedly, scientifically and objectively, meaning that for efforts of describing and interpreting it, sets of categories and concepts are created (like those discussed in the taxonomy section above).

This historical change in the role of animals in urban settings also brought about a change in people's emotional orientation towards animals more generally. As zoos grew in popularity, humans increasingly perceived animals as exotic phenomena that people should be able to

wonder at and be amused by. In addition, these changes in how people interacted with animals gave rise to feelings of sentimental and moral obligations against the mistreatment of animals. Likewise, accompanying these changes in emotional orientations towards animals were significant changes in the intellectual climate focused on animals. Scientists, philosophers and other theorists, provided critical analysis that fueled animal anti-cruelty debates to encompass questions of animal's rights to subsistence and autonomy/self-actualization (Russow, 1989).

The marginalization of utilitarian animals from the city and their substitution with zoos and companion pets constitutes a significant historical and cultural change in human-animal relationships. These changes brought about great emotional and intellectual variance in how people conceptually and spatially frame animals. Framing animals reflects another long held human tradition of drawing distinctions about the natural world, specifically between geographical or environmental places. Making distinctions between spaces intimately involves “geographical imaginations” (Mansfield, 2003) or “imaginative geography” (Said, 1978). According to Said, imaginative geography serves “to position ‘them’ (animals) relative to ‘us’ (humans) in a fashion that links a conceptual ‘othering’ (setting them apart from us in terms of character traits) to a geographical ‘othering’ (fixing them in worldly places and spaces different from those that we humans tend to occupy)” (Philo & Wilbert, pp 10-11). Often times this imaginative geography is internalized to presume that certain animals can be (physically and conceptually) close to us, while others are meant to be remote.

These geographical imaginations can vary significantly among individuals and groups living in the urban environment, who hold different beliefs about what animals and wildlife should be around them. As Griffiths, Poulter and Sibley put it, “The urban environment is one where nature has been contained and transformed. The city is subject to an ordering process

which signals what can be included in urban space and what does not belong... Thus, the place of animals in the city is uncertain and often contested” (2000, pg 61). So while the urban environment can be seen as the true home of the domestic cat, it can also be seen as the source of its controversy, placing it in an even more precarious position than that of raccoons, possums and skunks.

A more recent development correlated with these historical changes and geographic imaginaries more broadly, comes out of critical evaluation of the domestic cat’s proliferation, as reflected in its classification as an invasive and exotic species. The most common definition according to the Invasive Species Specialist Group, of this notion entails alien or non-indigenous animals and plants that negatively affect the habitats and existences of native flora and fauna they invade (GISD, 2005). These harmful impacts can be environmental, ecological and economical, but usually involve the invasive species disruption of a region by dominating over flora or fauna species acknowledged as native.

In this way the domestic cat is seen as perhaps the worst invasive species (excluding humans) because of its adaptive capacity to thrive in almost any natural and artificial environment, presumably outcompeting native predators and beleaguering indigenous habitats. In referencing the empirical degradation of endemic island species/habitats and the cat’s colonial predation more broadly, this has become ubiquitous language for many government and non-governmental organizations involved in natural conservation. Unfortunately, this approach gives little specification to the degree of severity domestic cats constitute in modern fabrications of wild/urban landscapes, and presupposes a particular point in history when a given bioregion was in its ‘purest’ state, presumably unaltered by humans (Anderson, 1998).

The idea of wilderness or nature as something existing completely separate of human influence or modification, is a canonical western concept that stems from a rationalist dualism of human/nature, promulgated in the 15th century (Anderson, 1998). Not only does this dualism ignore the overwhelming evidence of pre-colonial indigenous people's inhabitation and adaption of the natural environment, but as Anderson puts it, this "dualism progressively came to imply a hierarchy that pitted nature both against and *beneath* the human, who was henceforth justified in treating nature as object, as background to-and instrument of-human purposes" (Anderson, pp 30). So the classification of the domestic cat as an invasive and exotic species reflects a long held human tradition of conceptually and spatially ordering the human and non-human world, especially in the modern agenda of discerning what does and does not belong in urban and natural environments, as they are institutionally and culturally recognized.

The attempt at labeling the domestic cat as an invasive species not only prescribes to the ideology of a 'native' environment predating human alteration, but also adheres to the more recent discipline of relegating animals according to the human reproduction of 'natural' wilderness (regardless of how anachronistic and presumptuous it may appear). In this way, the domestic cat's present and historical biogeography both as an urban dweller and invasive species, are seen as contentious and problematic. In most cases this results in the domestic cat being distinguished in reference to where it is found subsisting, most notably indoors or outdoors, the latter of which being most infelicitous.

Feral cats as a research object

As discussed thus far, the domestic cat's taxonomy and domestication create challenges to traditional conceptual orderings used to differentiate wild/domestic animals. This results in the

need to contextually frame the varieties of domestic cats according to the specific human-animal relationship. Likewise, the cat's biogeography and invasiveness challenge ongoing spatial orderings used to reproduce urban/natural environments. This results in the need to contextually frame the varieties of domestic cats according to where they are found. These practices reflect imaginative geographies in the long standing human convention of making distinctions between biophysical things and between spaces.

As this review has demonstrated, the variety of distinctions used to juxtapose the domestic cat to humans changes according to social discourses and activities (like that of ordering the urban environment), which ineluctably affect animal livelihoods. This means that the domestic cat's cultural context almost always precipitates its natural context (Malamud, 2007). Obviously not all domestic cats have the same relationship to humans, but vary considerably from needy lap-cats, to semi-owned pets, to non-tactile wild animals. Likewise, the areas that they inhabit range from strictly indoors, to free-roaming, to urban/suburban areas, to industrial estates, to metro-parks, to the countryside, and beyond. What this has led to is that not all domestic cats are considered equally, but instead are valued quite differently.

This becomes more interesting in considering how different people put different values on the kinds of relationships the domestic cat facilitates with humans and the types of places it occupies. These differences reflect the variance in human intellectual and emotional responses to animals that encroach upon residential life. As Griffiths, Poulter and Sibley put it, "Those animals which transgress the boundary between civilization and nature, or between public and private, which do not stay in their allotted spaces, are commonly sources of abjection, engendering feelings of discomfort or even nausea which we try to distance from the self, the group and associated spaces (but which we can never banish from the psyche)" (2000, pp 60). In

stating this, the authors aver that human responses to animals in general tend to portray desire and disgust, or affection and domination, in varying degrees depending on the person's perspective of the animal.

For this reason, the feral cat can be seen as the most contentious and unsettling form of the domestic cat, since people's perspectives of these animals entail an abundance of both admiration and abjection. Griffiths, Poulter and Sibley go on to explain that "feral cats occupy a zone somewhere else on the domestic-wild spectrum. Perceptions of these feral animals then overlap with those of the Wild Cat (*Felinus sylvestris*) from which the domestic cat (*Felinus catus*) is descended. Thus, the pet/feral/wild boundaries are blurred" (2000, pp 58). People's perspectives of these cats can vary significantly in how the feral cat is viewed and valued, not only because the feral cat exhibits a primitive relationship to humans and inhabits outdoor urban and rural environments, but because of the social issues underpinning their persistence.

The manifold ways in which the feral cat is perceived have brought about a range of people's concerns regarding both real and perceived problems. Generally these concerns include the spread of diseases (to pet cats, to other species, and to humans), public annoyance, predation of wildlife (specifically extinction and disturbance of native species and ecosystems), and the welfare of the cats themselves (Robertson, 2008). Because of these concerns and the different stakeholders that possess them, the concept of cat overpopulation has been embraced as the overarching problem, implying the necessity of indicative action.

The idea of overpopulation is used to describe a situation where the population of a certain organism is considered to exceed what a given environment can sustain (indefinitely). So the suggestion that feral cat populations have reached the maximal load of the environment in

which they subsist, certainly reflects the opinions of stakeholders involved in the altercation. Most markedly, it reflects a common ground where advocates of no-kill initiatives (on the basis of shelters and adoption agencies being too full), can rally with wildlife conservationists, and birders (on the basis of more unconfined cats being the impetus of more negative wildlife inflictions) to address the rising numbers of cats.

While overpopulation amalgamates stakeholders, it simultaneously foments heated controversy and conflict as to how best to reduce the populations of feral and stray cats. This is because the diversity of management proposals derives from the bounty of ways in which feral cats are viewed and valued. Management suggestions include: doing nothing, killing on site, implementing a hunting season, use of non-surgical contraceptives, use of wildlife repellants, culling, requiring licenses, trap-remove-euthanize, trap-relocate, trap-neuter/spay-return (TNR), trap-test-vaccinate-alter-return (TTVAR), providing affordable spay/neuter programs, education campaigns, and other innovative efforts to curb cat abandonment.

The purpose of this research was to document the variegated perspectives stakeholders have in the debate on feral cats. These predilections are seen as represented in how stakeholders define the problem, the concerns they deem most dire, and the management solutions postulated as most appropriate. In the subsequent methods section of this report, the way in which these predilections were described is outlined according to the academic literatures reviewed, the national and local non-academic stakeholders studied, and the interviews conducted with local representatives of stakeholder organizations. These findings were further analyzed with reference to other publications in the production of the background and discussion portions of this report.

Methods

In the incipient stages of research, a number of academic articles already written on the topic of feral cats, perceptions of feral cats, as well as control methods for feral cats, were carefully reviewed (Ash & Adams 2003, Jessup 2004, Lord 2008, Loyd & Miller 2010, Natoli et al. 2006, Robertson 2008, Toukhsati, Bennett, Coleman 2007, Winter 2004). While perusing these publications certain stakeholders emerged not only as discussed in the literature (like the general urban public, pet owners, feral cat caregivers, birders, wildlife-advocates, animal-welfare advocates, and TNR/TTVAR advocates), but also as represented in the views of its authors (such as veterinarians, biologists, and professors of various departments). In considering what research was conducted, who performed it, and how the recordings and results were discussed, there seemed to be a latent level of bias to how the authors viewed the ‘problem’ of feral cats. More specifically, each article to some degree or another expresses various beliefs about cats being outdoors, being unowned, their impacts on wildlife, and their control.

It is unsurprising that these authors hold varying perspectives of the feral cat, simply based on the variety of their academic locations, such as the Department of Wildlife and fisheries science, A&M University, the Animal Welfare Science Center, Psychology Department, Monash University, the Biology Department, Cumberland College, and the College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Florida, to name a few. After broadening my literature review to the internet, I found that the views of both local and national non-academic stakeholders behind the web sties visited, shared an even greater degree of diversity. Table One is a listing of the organizations I came across involved in the feral cat debate.

Table One: Organizations I encountered in this research

| Organization | Central Ohio | Nationwide | Public | Business | Non-prof/gov |
|---|---------------------|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| PetPromise | X | | | | X |
| Colony Cats | X | | | | X |
| Capital Area Humane Society | X | | | | X |
| Mid-Ohio Animal Welfare League | X | | | | X |
| Black and Orange Cat Foundation | X | | | | X |
| A Purrfect Start | X | | | | X |
| Shelter Outreach Services | X (Also NY) | | | | X |
| Spay/Neuter Clinic | X | | | | X |
| Save the Wild Side | X | | | | X |
| Animal Outreach | X | | | | X |
| Rascal Unit | X | | | | X |
| Alley Cat Allies | | X | | | X |
| Neighborhood Cats | | X | | | X |
| Cat Welfare Association | X | | | | X |
| American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals | X | X | | | X |
| Spay/USA | X | X | | | X |
| Humane Ohio Map Regions Central | X | | | | X |
| Ohio Division of Wildlife | X | X | X | | |
| A-1 Wildlife Removal | X | X | | X | |
| Dublin Wildlife Control | X | | | X | |
| Wildlife Control Company | X | X | | X | |
| Wildlife Removal and Exclusion | X | X | | X | |

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| Specialists | | | | | |
| Columbus Animal Control | X | | | X | |
| Critter Control | X | | | X | |
| Audubon Ohio | X | X | | | X |
| American Bird Conservancy | X | X | | | X |

After identifying the major stakeholders, I began to gather more in depth information about the Columbus based organizations. Each organization was studied to understand what concerns they had about feral cats and how feral cats were esteemed. This was achieved through reviewing “About us” and “About feral cats” information on websites, as well as categorizing these organizations according to the educational material they produce and the activities they participate in regarding feral cats. Subsequently, I preceded to email and phone call these organizations in efforts to conduct a loosely structured interview consisting of nine questions. These questions were aimed at understanding how the interviewee describes the problem with feral cats, the concerns they have about them, and the solutions they see as most appropriate. I asked about impressions of the amount of feral/stray cats in Columbus, OH, if they had the impression there was a problem, how they described the problem, the reasons behind the problem, how their profession is affected, their main concerns, the best approach to addressing those concerns, and how the problem overall can be resolved. (A listing of these questions can be viewed in Appendix One following the conclusion.)

Over a four month period, through emails and phone calls I attempted to get interviews with representatives from as many organizations as possible, resulting in face to face tape recorded interviews with four Columbus based caretakers of feral cats, three local non-profit organizations that work with feral cats, and the Ohio Division of Wildlife. Two local wildlife control companies were also interviewed, but for reasons of anonymity these were conducted

over the phone. These interviews were transcribed to written documents and studied for the discussion of this paper.

Having obtained the information from and regarding all these resources, I analyzed them for specific themes and arguments. The interviews were carefully reviewed in relation to the information obtained through website as well as that presented in academic articles, in attempts to organize the perspectives communicated as either similar or different and to what degrees. By analyzing similarities/differences in conceptual approaches taken toward feral cats as well as the similarities/differences in discussing the activities and treatment of feral cats, I found there to be four discrete positions that could generally categorize stakeholders. These positions are discussed in the interpretive findings portion of this report by describing how feral cats and the problem of cat overpopulation are perceived discretely from each position. These positions are further interpreted in reference to four distinct attitudes taken towards animals (as recognized in the list of nine categorized from the research conducted by Stephen R. Kellert) (Kellert, 1989), as well as relevant background information in the subsequent discussion section of this report. While these positions were not presumed prior to conducting this research and analysis, they nevertheless reflect my own interpretation of the views and opinions of the groups and individuals studied as they relate to the literature and organization material reviewed.

Interpretive Findings

The myriad of perspectives encountered in this study can be represented in four distinct positions taken on the issue of feral cats. These positions don't map directly onto individual persons, but rather are composites of views from different individuals and organizational materials, that to some degree conform with one another in how feral cats are viewed and valued.

These positions emerge from the perspectives encountered in this study with distinct approaches to how feral cats are considered and distinct implications about what to do with them. A certain level of perception stability was found in the interviews as well as literature and organization reviews that were grouped to form the following four discrete positions.

In outlining these positions, I describe the situation of feral cats and cat overpopulation from the position's perspective and then will revisit these positions with additional interpretation. Each position presents a unique vantage point from which the feral cat and cat overpopulation can be understood. These positions are discussed according to similarities and differences in how stakeholders defined the problem, the concerns they deemed most dire, and the management solutions seen as most appropriate.

Feral Autonomy Position:

The first position comes from stakeholders actively involved in the promotion of TNR/TTVAR programs for feral cats. According to this position, the extent of the cat's overpopulation problem is much worse than many people realize, simply because they are so good at hiding. The number of cats in a given location that is under the patronage of a caretaker is almost always twice, if not three times, as many as the caretaker is aware of. However, feral cats themselves are viewed as having a rightful place in the natural/urban environment as 'wild' animals, "pose no threat to humans or other animals" and aren't a problem if their populations can be managed through spaying/neutering efforts (Alley Cat Allies, 2003).

While feral cats live happy existences comparable to their Wildcat ancestors, the problem of overpopulation is more specifically with friendly pre-owned cats that people abandon and put out, who could be put up for adoption if shelters and rescues weren't already full. These cats that

have grown up indoors under the companionship of owners have not been habituated to life outdoors. “People don’t realize that the other cats, the truly feral cats will run them off from the food source. You know and they loose weight, they get sick, and get parasites, the whole bit. Their bodies are not made like the true ferals out there” (Interview #1). While these stakeholders still wish to improve the quality of life for feral cats by reducing their numbers with TNR and TTVAR programs, the main concern is that stray and abandoned cats have nowhere to go to be inside and taken care of properly as pets.

The reasons behind these problems are numerous but can generally be seen as human neglect and a disregard of animal lives. These sources of the problem are especially evident by looking at the financial aspects of homeowners, as well as larger agencies, and the way in which these cats are treated. Because caretakers of feral and stray cats rarely have the economic resources to provide their colonies with veterinary care, their cats are usually collected and euthanized by larger agencies in response to neighborhood complains. Often times this results in more closet caretakers who “don’t know who to call and they don’t want people to know where their cats are because it puts them in danger” (Interview #1). In addition, because of the misconceptions that pet cats can fend for themselves, the misunderstandings about urinating and mating problems that frustrate cat owners, the lack of priority and/or funding given to fixing pet cats, and the lack of laws that restrict the abandonment of pet cats, has produced the ease with which unwanted pet cats are dispose of.

In attempting to address the overpopulation problem of feral and stray cats, adoptions of friendly socialized cats need to increase and the rates of their abandonment need to decrease. This can be accomplished through education programs that promote “making feral cats welcome in your community” (Alley Cat Allies, 2003), as well as legislation that obstruct the ease with

which cats can be discarded, such as licensing and registration laws. Likewise, the adequate allocation of funding for affordable spay/neuter programs for cat owners and feral cat caretakers is needed to help mitigate the problem of overpopulation, since many people simply do not have the resources available to get these cats fixed. While the feral cat will always be around and pet abandonment will never be completely abolished, TNR/TTVAR programs, if done strategically with the collaboration of existing organizations, with adequate funding and with education campaigns, can essentially solve the current problem of cat overpopulation.

Cat Abandonment Position:

The second position is relatively similar to the first, since many of these stakeholders are also involved in TNR/TTVAR programs, but differs in the way in which feral cats are viewed and valued. While the extent of the overpopulation problem is usually specific to the scale of neighborhoods and counties, the problem is less differentiated between feral and stray cats. “One stray or feral cat is a problem. Because if it’s not fixed, it’s going to reproduce” (Interview #2). Each kitten born, even by a feral mother, is an abandoned animal that is not feral but rather adoptable and deserving of a place in a home where it can be cared for. Though there is a short window of time in which these kittens can be socialized to humans, they do not choose a feral existence but rather are forced into a short and hopeless low-quality life on the streets.

According to these stakeholders “if a feral cat survives kittenhood, his average lifespan is less than two years if living on his own. If a cat is lucky enough to be in a colony that has a caretaker, he may reach 10 years” (ASPCA, 2011). This is because of the inherent risks to life outdoors, such as disease, vehicles, human cruelty, animal control companies, and dogs/other animals. Though the truly feral cat is unfit for a home and rightly respected as occupying its

chosen territory in the natural/urban environment, the human care for these animals is all the more essential. Human involvement is crucial not only in preventing feral and stray cats from reproducing, but in improving their low-quality of life by providing them with veterinary care, protection, shelter and food. “A lot of them end up dying miserable, slow deaths, because they get sick on the street. There’s nobody to take care of them” (Interview #02). The main concern of these stakeholders then is the welfare of feral and stray cats’ livelihoods outdoors and especially the welfare of kittens.

Similar to the first position, the source of the cat’s overpopulation is seen generally as the result of human neglect and a ubiquitous disregard of life. The proof of this is in the present situation where cats aren’t spayed/neutered, are abandoned by owners, and are left to reproduce in the ‘wild.’ “Feral cats deserve caretaking just as much as the kitties who live with us; they are often victims of abandonment, accidental loss, and failure by owners to fix their pets” (Humane Society, 2011). These occurrences demonstrate either that people do not care about the cat’s overpopulation, do not have the resources to do anything about it, or are simply unaware. The continued lack of human involvement in addressing the cat’s overpopulation is the context for why feral and stray cats are equally abandoned to a low-quality of life for which humans are ultimately responsible.

To deal with these concerns and the general problem of overpopulation, the solution is two-fold entailing both long-term and short-term goals. The long-term solution to improving the quality of life for feral and stray cats “from the very beginning is to start teaching respect for life on all levels” (Interview #2). This education must stress the importance of spaying/neutering programs, the humane treatment of all types of cats, and the adoption of cats from rescues or shelters (rather than pet stores). The short-term solution is the allocations of funds to regularly

provide low-cost to no-cost, high-volume spay/neuter clinics available to the general public. This will require the collaboration and innovation of existing organizations to expand the range of their veterinary care with things like mobile clinics making rounds to neighborhoods and communities especially in need. Overall, the issue is seen as resolvable if the numbers of truly feral cats can be diminished through TNR/TTVAR, if their livelihoods can be improved with increased human care, and if kittens and strays can be placed in good homes.

Nuisance Animal Position:

The third position taken on the issue of the cat's overpopulation comes from stakeholders involved in the private sector's management of wild animals in the urban environment. The extent of the problem is seen as severe and widespread, while the characteristic of a cat being feral or unsocialized is considered a disability "that keeps them from being a pet or a positive part of society" (Interview #4). Similar to the second position, feral and stray cats are perceived as living inhumane existences exposed to diseases, malnutrition, abuse, vehicular accidents, and generally inhospitable conditions. In addition to being a reservoir of disease that threaten human and other specie's health, outdoor cats in general are a nuisance to residential life because of the damage they cause to private property, the cacophony their mating and fighting causes, and their negative impacts on wildlife.

The main concerns affiliated with feral cats for these stakeholders are that they're extremely dangerous and put wildlife removal specialists in a precarious legal position. The traps and baits used to remove animals like skunks, possums, rabbits, and raccoons also ensnare outdoor cats. "Of all the wild animals I have dealt with, trapped feral cats can be the most ferocious! They claw, bite, hiss, emit a nasty musk scent, and do anything to escape"

(Professional Wildlife Removal, 2010). While stray and free-roaming cats pose much less risk to the captors physical wellbeing, they still place animal control companies in an equivocal situation where they can easily be at risk of legal prosecution. Re-releasing the trapped cats can be considered abandonment, euthanizing them can be seen as cruelty, and relocating them can be viewed as pawning off the problem to someone else. Overall, nothing good comes from cats being outdoors since there is no conventional or codified consensus on how to handle them, especially since so many are unidentifiable as pets.

While this position differs notably from the first two explained, these stakeholders agree partially that the source of the cat's overpopulation stems from general human neglect and more specifically, irresponsibility. The cat is an invasive and exotic species that has taken the place of the bobcat, but gotten entirely out of hand because of human introduction and carelessness. The problem persists because people and organizations involved act too much according to their hearts/emotions and not according to what is effective. "Municipal and county animal control agencies, humane animal shelters and various other public and private 'pet' management agencies exist because of wild or unwanted house cats and dogs. These agencies destroy millions of stray cats annually" (Critter Control, 2011). Caretakers of cat colonies exacerbate the overpopulation problem, and while TNR programs can be better than nothing, they do not address that these cats are still a great annoyance and abandoned to live in inhospitable conditions.

To adequately address these concerns and the cat's overpopulation problem, these stakeholders assert that "as pets they should be kept inside and if they're outside, they should fall under the same law requirements as dogs" (Interview #4). Likewise, licensing and registration laws for dogs should be extended to incorporate cats, and the feeding of outdoor cats should be

prohibited. The problem is very solvable and could be a source of great profit for animal removal companies, if they were legally entrusted with fixing and preventing the problem of cat populations outdoors. However, by and large the real solution to the problem is legislative and public consensus on what ‘the right thing to do’ is regarding these animals.

Wildlife Conservation Position:

The fourth position is held by stakeholders involved in the conservation and protection of wildlife. While the extent of the feral and stray cat overpopulation problem is contingent on specific locations and environments, outdoor cats in general are considered a serious problem. For these stakeholders there is no need to differentiate between feral, stray or pet cats because any outdoor cat has a negative impact on wildlife both in the urban and natural environment. All forms of the domestic cat are unnatural predators to central Ohio, “they’re exotic wildlife, [and] they fill a niche in the food chain that’s supposed to be there. They’re competing in direct competition with coyotes and foxes and raptors... but are more prolific and they’re able to out compete in a lot of cases” (Interview #6). As a whole, the problem with feral and stray cats, as well as any outdoor cat, is that they are detrimental to wildlife, especially birds.

The main concern for these stakeholders is that nationwide rural cats alone are likely to kill hundreds of millions of birds a year not including suburban and urban cats, or small mammal prey (Coleman, Temple, & Craven 1997). The acceptance of cats outdoors is a problem simply because they like to kill things, they are good at it and it is something inherent to them. In addition, the transmission of diseases especially from feral/stray cats to other cats, animals and humans is of significant worry since many are not vaccinated or properly taken care of medically. Because these cats occupy a niche in the natural food chain and are in close contact

with other animals, their predation and transmission of diseases are the crucial concerns affiliated with the problem of their overpopulation. The rising number of cats outdoors means that more wildlife will be damaged.

In similarity with the third position asserted above, the reason behind the problem of the cat's overpopulation originates from human neglect and irresponsibility. The general lack of awareness about the dangers of letting pet cats outdoors as well as about the harmful affects they have on wildlife, demonstrates human negligence, and the tolerance of cats continually reproducing outdoors reflects human irresponsibility. In addition, another source of the problem is the emotional climate surrounding more conventional methods of control and management that makes effectively addressing their overpopulation incredibly difficult. "They're considered a domestic animal, so they're tolerated... people feed them, feel sorry for them you know, they love animals... but if they don't have a collar on them, than there's really nobody to go after as far as a responsible party" (Interview #6). This lack of accountability is reflected in the amount of cats that are not registered, sexually altered, vaccinated, or confined to a home, and consequently are continuing to make the problem worse.

For these stakeholders, the best way to go about addressing these concerns and the problem of overpopulation is with education campaigns that teach the importance of keeping cats indoors and the importance of having pets spayed/neutered. Likewise, licensing and registration laws can be useful in creating a funding mechanism that could be used to control feral and stray cats. However, while collecting and euthanizing unowned outdoor cats is the most effective means of control, the emotional climate of the issue will likely prevent the eradication of outdoor cats. This means that the problem will never fully go away and that it becomes a management issue, where efforts like TNR/TTVAR, even though they are bad for wildlife and not endorsed,

can be one tool available to the public used to reduce their numbers and potentially their impacts on wildlife. Alternatives to TNR though, like fully enclosed cat sanctuaries are recommended as more humane both for wildlife and cats (American Bird Conservancy, 2004).

Discussion

“A dazzling panoply of animals surrounds us in our world: animals we fondle, and animals we hunt; animals who are movie stars, and animals who are porn stars; animals who are isolated (from other animals) in elaborate cultural frames, and animals living in compounds like puppy mills or factory farms or research labs, whose numbers are vast and whose lives are so desolate as to overwhelm our sensibilities: animals we tune out, erase, rather than confront the moral problem they represent; animals we fetishize (exotic animals, expensive animals, illicit animals, charismatic animals); animals we subject to ridicule (tigers jumping through hoops; spectacles in zoos; subjects of ‘stupid pet tricks,’ a regular feature on late-night television entertainment); animals momentarily in vogue (emperor penguins, after a striking documentary; panda bears, amid political jousting; akita dogs, commercially overbred), and animals who float through the ether of television and the Internet; animals who are inappropriately transplanted into an ecosystem and run wild, or cause other ecological havoc, and animals who are refugees from habitats that people have polluted or confiscated.” (Malamud, 2007, pp 3-4)

This quote embodies how an animal’s existence is drastically attenuated by its cultural contextualization in human society. Prior to stating this, the author explains that “today, an animal’s cultural image seems to be profoundly malleable, almost infinitely versatile; and this bodes ill because of the absence of a fixed, meaningful identity facilitates its dizzying transformation into whatever its culturally imperialistic human fabricators want it to be” (Malamud, pp 2). While animals are empirically subordinate elements of an anthropocentric narrative, this is not to suggest certain good/bad judgments. More importantly, as discussed in the background, these quotes demonstrate the axiom of how animals historically (and still into the present) have been resources for human purposes. Certainly this is true in the consumption and use of an animal’s material properties, but also in the tantamount cultural consumption of animals for amusement, research, companionship, and other anthropocentric framings.

The plethora of animals in the conceptual and spatial degrees of proximity to humans, and the superfluity of ways in which animals are both physically and culturally consumed, means that there is an equal surfeit of ways in which people perceive them (with increasing discontinuities of good/bad judgments). In addition, this practice of reproducing animal subjects to satiate human endeavors is an ongoing phenomenon of perpetual change, with a linear progression that amasses new and old perceptions together. What this has propagated is that “never has the relationship between human and nonhuman animals been more hotly contested” (Malamud, back cover). The fact that human-animal relationships in general are highly polemical in continuing debates signifies the starting point for an overarching theme of this research concentrated on the ambivalence of feral cats in modern U.S. societies. This theme of contention attempts to thread the controversial issues of human-animal relationships, the domestic cat, and animals in the city together in the analysis of feral cats.

The positions outlined above have similarities and differences in their assertions about human-animal relationships, domestic cats, felicitous urban wildlife, and feral cats that when elucidated can significantly improve the ongoing discourse regarding the domestic cat’s overpopulation. In comparing and contrasting these four positions taken by stakeholders, it is important to also consider the information stated in the background. The following discussion will contextualize these positions in reference to the background as well as four different attitudes taken towards animals proposed by Kellert.

The ways in which these positions differ will be discussed as the points of contention in the present debate regarding how best to address the cat’s overpopulation. The intent of this discussion (as well as the entirety of this research undertaking), is to critically evaluate these positions as legitimate in their own right, without insinuations of sophistry, to establish the

specific issues of contention. With ongoing dialogue addressing these explicit sources of dissension, a denouement is more likely to come about producing a compromise of perspectives and methods utilized to tackle the problem.

Feral Autonomy revisited:

On the issue of feral and stray cats, these stakeholder's perspectives are analogous to Kellert's 'moralistic attitude'. According to the author's description, the moralistic attitude's utmost concern is for the appropriate ethical treatment of animals by humans. "While the moralistic attitude is often associated with feelings of strong affection for animals, its more fundamental characteristic is a philosophical emphasis on the nature of appropriate human conduct toward the nonhuman world" (Kellert, pp 7-8). Every animal is seen as having a right to existence and should be respected as an appropriate occupant of human and nonhuman space.

This position equally appreciates the many biological and cultural variations of the domestic cat as an essential component of why they are so fascinating, regardless of their nebulous classifications. Likewise, perhaps in conformity with how cats were perceived for much of their longstanding history, the presence of exotic animals in the urban landscape is viewed as enhancing the lives of community residents, rather than automatically invoking empathy as abandoned animals (Conover & McIvor, 1993). Though it lives a significantly different kind of life than a companion pet, the feral cat's wild existence is valued much like those of other wild animals, which aren't seen as inhumane despite the probability of shorter life spans. However, stray and abandoned cats are especially recognized as recipients of cruelty and human carelessness that needs to be redressed.

In light of the cat's overpopulation and utmost priority to the humane treatment of all animals, to enable feral cats to live healthier and happier lives, people need to protect and manage them through TNR/TTVAR programs (or more severe measures when endemic species are at absolute endangerment). For this position, traditional measures of relocation create a vacuum effect, meaning that "if the present colony is removed, new, unsterilized cats are certain to move in and the problems will recur" (Alley Cat Allies, 2003). Likewise, the research on the detrimental impacts of cats to wildlife in the U.S., for these stakeholders, seems largely anecdotal and is often dismissed as something very specific to certain locations and situations (Patronek, 1998). Especially if cats are provided for by caretakers, they are not seen as a problem outdoors because their impacts to wildlife are miniscule compared to humans, and the 'wilderness' of urban environments is not only managed, but continually developed and reproduced. For these reasons, the feral cat should be respected as having been with humans as long as the domestic cat, which justifies its place in society and certainly the urban environment.

Cat Abandonment revisited:

As expressed in the explicit concern for kittens and cats forced into what the stakeholders assert is an abandoned and low-quality life, this position parallels the "humanistic attitude" that emphasizes the projection of strong feelings and attachment to individual animals, especially pets. According to Kellert, "the humanistic attitude values animals primarily as basic sources of affection and companionship... [as well as] romanticized notions of animal innocence" (Kellert, pp 7). Animals are usually perceived as having feelings and experiences similar to humans, and empathy is predominantly felt for individual disadvantaged animals.

This position views all forms of the domestic cat as derivative of the idealized companion pet that is intended for a life of being cared for. Consequently, sympathy concentrates on feral and stray cats as despondent outcasts of an imperturbable society, and strong desire is placed on the amelioration of their quality of life. Because these cats are recognized as abandoned, their perpetual existence and feral characteristic are seen as unconstructive and inhumane occurrences resulting from a widespread disregard for life. However, because feral cats are finicky and territorial, they should be humanely managed and allowed to live out there potentially healthy and happy lives with human benefactors. On the other hand, “we must do more to prevent abandonment;” stray and abandoned cats need to be drastically confronted with accountability legislation (Levy, 2002).

Overall, the problem is seen as solvable and preventable, but requires the gradual regression of feral and stray cats through humane intervention. While it is unclear to what extent this position supports the absolute containment of cats indoors, it certainly promotes the responsible care for all outdoor cats to the greatest degree permissible by the cats themselves. “Kittens and assorted adults have emerged that are not yet human fearful ferals and they have been plucked from the streets and cared for by some devoted neighbors who are now looking for permanent homes for them” (Save the Wild Side, 2004). For this reason TNR alone, without TTVAR and sufficient human protection, intervention and care is seen as ‘subsidized abandonment,’ that while preventing the reproduction of more and more kittens, does nothing to empathetically amend the quality of life for feral cats.

Nuisance Animal revisited:

Since the stakeholders affirming this position are thoroughly active on traditional arrangements of animals (conceptually and spatially) in their removal management of residential properties, the “utilitarian attitude” seems to apply. This attitude embodies the domination of animals according to anthropocentric agendas. Kellert explains that “the fundamental attribute of the utilitarian attitude is imputing significance to animals based primarily on their usefulness to people [and] are usually subordinated to more practical demands for human material benefit” (Kellert, pp 9). This pertains to the ordering and development of urban wildlife and spaces, in addition to the profitable entrepreneurship of animals and natural environments.

In this position, the domestic cat is an exotic and invasive species that has become rampant and needs to be brought under control, especially in its disabling and inauspicious feral and stray forms. These cats in particular for this position need to be addressed since they are most rampant outdoors, cannot be measured aptly as pets, and contribute nothing productive to society. Feral cats, “for all intents and purposes, [are] a nuisance wildlife species” (Professional Wildlife Removal, 2010). In many cases they are more impudent to urban life than wild or domestic animals, simply because they act and live like the wild animals these specialists work with, but look like and are protected by law as pets. In effect, the overpopulation problem of cats outdoors in general causes these stakeholders a grave irritation and legal liability. To make matters worse, the financial aspect of public and private spending on TNR/TTVAR programs is viewed as quixotic, and in a lot of ways a waste of money.

These stakeholders affirm that cats have become such a problem outdoors because people are hesitant about the appropriate means for curbing their numbers, and unrelenting about acting

on their emotions rather than practical acumen; “trap and removal does work if the food source is also removed” (Winter, 2004). Central to this position is human purpose and intention for these animals. Because owners or semi-owners of feral and stray cats usually cannot be identified, these cats are seen as unwanted and unused byproducts of a consumer society that should be cleaned up and managed, if not sufficiently prevented. In addition, because these stakeholders specialize in the management of urban wildlife on private property, the modicum of public consensus on feral and stray cats is not only a liability but an impediment to their profession which is grounded in the wild/domestic dichotomy of space and species.

Wildlife Conservation revisited:

Evident in the fundamental concern for wildlife welfare, the fourth position resembles the “ecologicistic attitude” that encompasses a systematic conceptual rationality of species interrelations and ecosystems. In accomplishing this, barometers and distinctions are created to gauge the health or disturbance of natural environments and ecosystems. “Additionally, the ecologicistic approach shifts the focus of attention from individual animals to the behaviors of large numbers of wildlife species” (Kellert, pp7). Though the intellectual comprehension of nature is central to this approach, it is not without considerable human participation in the development and conservation of wilderness.

While this position regards the appreciation for all animal lives, it more specifically is preoccupied with the health and balance of wildlife as a whole. The cat’s contentious occupancy of the outdoors becomes centrally important since it is seen as unproductive to the recovery and subsistence of wildlife. “On the basis of compassion alone (for those who can imagine the impersonal nature of wildlife mortality figures and disruption of ecologic processes), the

suffering of wildlife must be weighed against the perceived welfare of feral cats” (Jessup, 2004). In reference to the domestic cat’s colonial predation during the 17-1800s and contemporary research studies, these stakeholders maintain that cats are an unnatural and invasive predator disrupting institutionally recognized native equilibriums. Because these stakeholders are publically entrusted with the management and control of indigenous flora and fauna, common taxonomy and biogeography distinctions as well as society/nature and wild/domestic dichotomies, are explicitly employed in formulating their position on feral cats and their professional achievements more broadly.

For these stakeholders, cats outdoors threaten other predator and prey species seen as underrepresented in urban settings, and more largely migratory bird populations. This position asserts that people need to have more concern for all animals, especially wildlife, by keeping their pets safely indoors. Likewise, cats should be owned and responsibly cared for, and if that is not the case than there should be procedural action taken to remove them from the setting. However, these stakeholders’ demonstrate responsiveness to changing cultural inflections by viewing TNR/TTVAR programs as better than nothing. This is because “in some cases, that’s a tool that’s available” for reducing the number of outdoor cats, redressing their harboring of diseases, and hopefully diminishing their impacts on wildlife (Interview #6).

Conclusion

The points of most controversy originate from the ways in which feral cats are either viewed as apposite ‘wild’ residents of public space or as disabled pariahs of societal misconduct. In addition, the degree to which feral cats are professed as living inhumane lives either as abandoned pets or as a tolerable phenomenon of urbanization becomes a divisive component.

Similarly, incongruity can be found deriving from perceptions of outdoor cats as wildlife in their own right or as invasively injurious to wildlife. Also, outdoor cats in the city can be seen either as enhancing residential life or as obstreperous to urban succession. These variances in how feral cats are esteemed create other tensions of conflict regarding the humane treatment and management of outdoor cats.

The extent to which human involvement is seen as exigent to improving the quality of life for feral cats or as culpable for exacerbating the dilemma they engender is equally a point of deliberation. Linked to this is how TNR/TTVAR programs are measured as effective or fanciful instruments for undertaking the problem of overpopulation and cats outdoors more broadly. In conjunction with this is the level to which euthanasia and eradication are envisioned as either unethical or proper responses for wildlife removal management overall. These core issues highlight the sources of intransigent partisanship that are often juxtaposed in the ongoing altercation concerning the feral cat and cat's overpopulation.

While these four discrete positions are littered with fervent partiality to how feral and stray cats are evaluated and how they should be controlled, there are also instances of congruence and harmony that can be particularly invaluable to ascertaining a clear path forward. All positions affirm that the paucity of educational and financial auspices from both private and public sectors for affordable spay/neuter clinics is seen as inextricable to the current predicament. While the specificities of what should be endorsed in these efforts of edification are relative to individual positions, the need for public consolidation and consensus is commonly recognized as the dependent variable for progress. Likewise, while opinions are multidimensional about TNR/TTVAR programs, these labors are largely sanctioned as better than nothing, since they reduce the amount and perhaps impacts of unconfined cats. Furthermore,

stray and abandoned animals are ineluctably acknowledged by all stakeholders, as intensifying the overpopulation problem and as deserving of more precautionary measures to be taken against this human rashness.

In proposing a hypothetical way forward, I do not intend to demonstrate favor for or against any particular position, but rather to articulate a potentially inchoate resolution I found apparent in the dispositions of these stakeholders. This proposal assumes that stakeholders will grow in their intellectual empathy and respect for the positions held by others and make compromises in their positional convictions for a common goal. While unanimous accord is unlikely to be embraced by all individuals, this research attests that beyond the caviling on issues of contention, the following theoretical compromise can be tendered.

With education and funding campaigns concentrated on the importance of spay/neuter endeavors, the protection of wildlife, and the amoral ramifications of pet abandonment, alliances between existing organizations and stakeholders can be achieved. It seems likely that increasing cultural appreciation for the feral form of domestic cats may in fact give rise to adequate innovative strategies to manage their overpopulation and deter their deleterious impacts on wildlife and private property. These specific concerns can be addressed with the use of TNR/TTVAR programs, responsible care/provisions for outdoor cats, and application of innocuous cat repellants.

In addition, with legal consensus on feral cats as legitimate wild occupants of (at least) urban landscapes, conventional methods of wildlife removal/management (such as euthanasia) can be employed when specific locations and situations justify them, however selectively as a last resort to alternative tactics. In this way, animal control and wildlife welfare specialists can

find advantages in expanding their repertoire of management practices available to meet public preferences by adopting and developing new approaches. To confront concerns of disease transmission as well as improve the quality of life for feral and stray cats, greater attention and consideration needs to be given to veterinary involvement, their specialized treatment of feral cats, and especially the subsidization of low to no-cost spay/neuter clinics for cat owners and caretakers.

In many ways this proposal for a way forward reaches beyond the scope of my research, and while it appears at the conclusion of this report, it is in no way intended to take attention away from the legitimacy and integrity of the perspectives held in each of the positions represented above. A plethora of valid emotions and opinions are expressed in these positions that deserve careful consideration and critical evaluation in their own right, as well as in light of the historical, cultural, and environmental issues underpinning them. As this report has demonstrated, the concepts and issues surrounding the debate of the cat's overpopulation and the feral cat in particular, while complex and only partly considered in this research, are nonetheless contextually significant for understanding and respecting these different positions.

These positions reflect various concerns for feral/stray cats but also various ways for perceiving these cats. The variances arise because the domestic cat is very hard to conceptually and spatially order, especially according to conventional wild/domestic distinctions for animals and human/nature distinctions for the production of space. In addition, the issues of animals in the urban environment and human-animal relationships more broadly, which are often ambiguous and contentious help contextualize the reasons behind differing positions. It was the intent of this research to contribute to the contextual understanding of these positions for ongoing debate in efforts to help stakeholders discern a clear way forward.

Appendix 1

Questions asked during interviews with local stakeholders:

1. What is your impression of the amount of stray and feral cats in Columbus Ohio?
2. Is it your impression that there is a problem of stray and feral cats in Columbus?
3. How would you describe the nature of this problem of stray and feral cats?
4. In your opinion, what are the reasons or causes behind the stray and feral cat problem in Columbus?
5. How does the feral cat problem impact or affect you in your line of work?
6. As a professional _____, what are your main concerns regarding the stray and feral cat problem?
7. What do you think is the best method or approach to go about addressing those concerns?
8. What do you think is necessary to fully address the stray and feral cat problem in Columbus, Ohio?

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