

The Real Question about Cats

By Michael Hutchins, Executive Director/CEO of The Wildlife Society

A headline in Wednesday's *Washington Post* asks the question, "Is an alley cat's life worth living?" For anyone who cares about wildlife conservation, the real question should be, "Is our native wildlife worth saving?" If you answer "yes" to the latter, then feral cats have got to go.

Unfortunately, Washington, D.C., and growing numbers of other cities across the country are bowing to pressure from well-funded advocacy groups that promote trap-neuter-return (TNR) programs for feral-cat management. In theory, such programs arrange to capture, sterilize, and vaccinate cats then return them to the streets, where volunteers often provide food and water. Some argue that this is more "humane" than euthanizing feral cats.

Nonsense. Outdoor cats often live short, brutal lives, being hit by cars or killed by disease, harassment, or predation. More important, they spread diseases such as rabies and toxoplasmosis to humans and native wildlife, and, whether well-fed or not, feral cats hunt and kill native wildlife on a catastrophic scale—a reality that's far from "humane."

The number of free-roaming cats in the U.S. today—including outdoor pets, strays, and feral cats—tops 100 million. By some estimates, these skillful predators kill upwards of a million birds *every day*, and about twice as many small rodents and other prey, including endangered species such as Key Largo woodrats, Hawaiian crows, and baby sea turtles. Where is the outcry about those lost lives?

All this slaughter is coming from an animal that is not even native to North America. In fact, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature lists domestic cats as one of the "world's worst" invasive species, and conservation scientists are raising alarms that cats must be controlled if we hope to preserve ecological balance, particularly on islands and in habitat fragments like urban parks.

Recent studies illustrate the crisis. On May 24, scientists from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases published a study showing that the parasite that causes toxoplasmosis, which enters the water from infected cat feces, is contributing to the deaths of thousands of marine mammals, including seals, sea lions, sea otters, and dolphins.. In addition, at a time when nearly one-third of the bird species in the U.S. are endangered, threatened, or in steep decline, the number of domestic cats is soaring, a significant threat to bird survival, especially in urban areas like Washington, D.C.

The American Bird Conservancy and The Wildlife Society, along with nearly 60 professional societies and conservation organizations, recently sent a letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar demanding that he take this growing threat to our native biodiversity seriously by moving to

actively control feral cat populations on public lands. Such federal action would make legal and fiscal sense: The federal Endangered Species Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act both make it illegal to harm protected species, and federal agencies spend millions of dollars each year on programs to protect at-risk species. So why do we allow cats to roam freely outdoors to kill endangered species and infect them with disease? That is a crime against nature.

The science is clear: Cats are causing irreparable harm to native wildlife and should be kept indoors. Unfortunately, too many public officials, policymakers, and citizens practice willful “eco-ignorance” about the feral cat problem, choosing to ignore the science.

It’s all too easy for cat-advocacy groups like HSUS and Alley Cat Allies to pour millions of dollars into heart-tugging campaigns that promote TNR programs and demonize the conservation scientists who oppose them. Inspired by cute, fluffy cats and movie star spokespeople, citizens buy into the TNR fallacy, and policymakers often go along, unwilling to be labeled as “tough on cats.”

This emotional response ignores science, and it’s science—not emotion—that should underlie policies on how to manage feral cats and conserve other wildlife. The Wildlife Society, representing more than 10,000 wildlife professionals, strongly opposes TNR management, which doesn’t reduce the numbers of feral cats and ignores the real problem of cats killing wildlife. How many more peer-reviewed studies do we need to convince leaders to change the way we deal with the feral cat population explosion in this country? It is high time that we ask the right questions in the feral cat debate, and that we allow rational answers to prevail.