



Prince Georges Feral Friends, SPCA, Inc.

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Compassion Watch



The television outreach of the
Prince George's Compassion Project

October 11, 2010

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The Honorable Thomas E. Dernoga, Chairman
The Prince George's County Council
14741 Governor Oden Bowie Dr., 2nd Floor
Upper Marlboro, MD 20772

Dear Mr. Dernoga:

There are an estimated 143,000 freeroaming cats in Prince George's County.

In the past, the policy of Animal Management for dealing with freeroaming cat population control was "catch and kill". The natural consequence of exterminating cats from an area, however, is that the rodent population, the cats' primary prey, grows without the constraint of a predator. The next natural consequence is that the increase in the rodent population will support an increased rate of reproduction by cats that move in from the surrounding area, resulting in an even larger population of cats. It should not be a surprise that, although many thousands of cats were killed by Animal Management as a result of this "catch and kill" policy, their population remained an issue and the killing continued.

Prince Georges Feral Friends, SPCA has been working for over a decade to humanely control the population of freeroaming cats using a procedure that is growing in popularity, due to its proven success in many jurisdictions around the U.S. and other countries. This procedure is called Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) and has been adopted as official policy in nearby Baltimore City and the District of Columbia, among many other locations.

Health Issues – Humans

Rodents can assist in the transmission of diseases to humans. History tells us about the hysteria surrounding black cats which caused the wholesale killing of these creatures in the middle ages, which contributed to, and was immediately followed by the Plague, which was transmitted to humans by the fleas on rodents, and resulted in the death of about 1/3 of the human population of Europe. Cats provide a natural rodent control and help to prevent the transmission of flea-borne diseases to humans.

Also, it has been a common practice in wildlife control to create a barrier for the transmission of a disease by the mass vaccination of wildlife populations. In this context, it is called Trap-Vaccinate-Release (TVR), and is an accepted strategy for disease control that has been followed for decades.

Although the primary objective of TNR is population control, an integral part of the process is that the veterinarian administers a Rabies vaccine to every cat, thereby creating a barrier for Rabies in the cats that have been TNRed.

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Obviously the rule is, in order to prevent disease, encourage TNR.

Health Issues – The Cats

Please keep in mind that in the past, Animal Management has been discouraging TNR, and even erroneously telling people that feeding cats is unlawful. Compassionate people who fed cats, in spite of the pressure applied by Animal Management, were forced to assume ownership of the animals, or were given huge fines. Policies such as these have been followed in order to discourage, as much as possible, the human intervention in the lives of freeroaming cats. Nature has its effect, as well, and there is a high mortality rate among animals that are born outdoors. Not every egg becomes an adult bird, and not every cat born outdoors becomes an adult.

Notwithstanding Animal Management's discouragement of human intervention, and the natural mortality rate, the overall population of freeroaming cats continues to grow and to be an issue that deserves attention. Obviously, cats do quite well outdoors, since there are freeroaming cat population problems in Canada, a much less hospitable environment than ours.

The discouragement of TNR leaves the freeroaming cat populations in their natural state. Intact cats are driven to reproduce, and there is competition for the privilege. This results in fighting, scratching, and biting. The bites may result in open wounds that allow the transmission of disease from one cat to another through the exchange of saliva. Searching for mates causes cats to cross roads and sometimes get hit by cars. Mating results in repeated litters of kittens which deplete the strength of the reproducing females and results in unhealthy mothers and weak kittens.

TNR, on the other hand, changes the hormonal activity which greatly decreases, if not eliminates, the mating drive. This eliminates the fighting and the consequential transmission of disease. It eliminates the wandering in search of mating opportunities, and incidents of cats being hit by cars. Of course, it also eliminates litters of kittens, which contributes to the overall health of the cats.

In a study of 1500 freeroaming cats done by Dr. Julie Levy at the University of Florida in Gainesville, she found that the prevalence of serious diseases was 3-5%, depending on the disease being studied. This approximates the prevalence of those same diseases in owned pets.

In a recent Harris Poll, when asked if it was preferable to allow a cat to live out its life outdoors or be captured and "euthanized" (killed), even when it was assumed that the cat might live only two years and be killed by a traumatic event, like being hit by a car, 83% of respondents said that it was more humane to allow the cat to live outdoors. We have found that cats living in managed (TNRed) colonies live approximately 8 years.

Bird Populations

Sometimes an objection to TNR is made because cats "decimate bird populations". There are several facts that should be considered with regard to this claim. First of all, most of the arguments have as their source Ms. Linda Winter, formerly of the American Bird Conservancy. Ms. Winter took several unscientific papers and created a campaign of misinformation. One of the papers, was known as the "Wisconsin Study". Co-author Stanley Temple, has clarified the data by saying,

"The media has had a field day with this since we started. Those figures were from our proposal. They aren't actual data; that was just our projection to show how bad it might be."

To balance this hype, it is only necessary to look at the Audubon Society's exhaustive publication "The State of the Birds". This is a massive, global scientific analysis of the reasons why many species of birds are experiencing declining

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population numbers. Although the major contributor to this problem is the loss of nesting habitat, the use of pesticides and many other factors are enumerated. **Feral cats are not even mentioned.** The Cat is mentioned only in the context of the suggestion that people who vacation with their pets in national parks should keep their pets under control. Certainly if feral cats were decimating (reducing to 10%) bird populations, it would get a mention.

In any case, the logic of discouraging TNR because cats might impact bird population seems a bit twisted. If it is desirable to limit the impact of cats on bird populations, and TNR has been the only approach proven to actually reduce cat populations, then it seems that it would be better to encourage TNR.

Counting the Cost

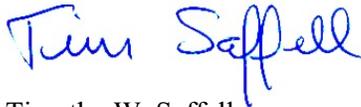
The national average cost of impounding, only to kill, a feral cat is about \$150 per cat. This does not include the emotional cost to a Good Samaritan of having an animal killed that s/he has been feeding, has become attached to, and has provided veterinary care for.

On the other hand, a low-cost spay/neuter with a Rabies vaccine costs about \$50-60. In some cases, this can be obtained free of charge. In Prince George's County, this cost has been borne by residents who are Good Samaritans, and volunteer to do TNR in their neighborhood. It has cost the county nothing. These volunteers are providing a service to the county and paying out of their own pockets for the privilege.

Towards A Humane Prince George's County

I would be happy to discuss any of these, or other issues with you, with reference to TNR. Feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,



Timothy W. Saffell

cc: The Prince George's County Council
The Honorable Jack B. Johnson, County Executive
Charles W. Wilson, Director, DER
Howard Burnette, Deputy, Health & Human Services
Donald Shell, MD, MA, Health Officer