

## **Feral cats – forgotten felines**

The Cape of Good Hope SPCA believes that feral cats deserve caretaking just as much as the kitties who we share our homes with us as do. Feral cats are often victims of abandonment, accidental loss and failure by owners to sterilise their pets.

The following information (available at [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org)) provides some helpful advice on how to help feral cats in your community.

### **What's a feral cat?**

It's easy to confuse a feral cat with a stray cat (hint: feral cats are the offspring of lost or abandoned pet cats or other feral cats who are not fixed). They don't easily adapt, or may never adapt, to living as pets in close contact with people, but they still need our help. Many don't survive - if they do, their lives aren't easy without human caretakers.

Free-roaming cats can have an impact on wildlife, and it is important that this also be acknowledged as part of the dynamic of dealing with feral cats.

The SPCA endorses **Trap-Neuter-Return** programmes, which helps improve the health and quality of life for feral cats and prevent more from being born into this dangerous and difficult existence.

### **Where do feral cats live?**

Feral cats typically live in a colony—a group of related cats. The colony occupies and defends a specific territory where food (a restaurant, a person who feeds them) and shelter (beneath a porch, in an abandoned building) are available. Since feral cats typically fear strangers, it is likely that people may not realize that feral cats are living nearby because the cats are rarely seen.

### **How do feral cats survive — find food, stay warm, etc.?**

Many don't survive. If they do survive, their lives aren't easy without human caretakers. Females may become pregnant as young as five months of age and may have two to three litters a year. Being pregnant so young and so often, and having and nursing kittens, is even more stressful on female cats who are struggling to survive. More than half of the kittens are likely to die without human intervention. Males who roam and fight to find mates and defend their territories may be injured and transmit diseases to one another through bite wounds, faeces and urine. Feral cats may find food outside a restaurant, eat from domestic cats' bowls by entering and dominating their territories or someone may feed them. They may find shelter from the elements beneath a porch or in an abandoned building. But often they are without a reliable source of food and adequate shelter.

## **What is Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR)?**

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) is a strategy for improving the lives of feral cats and reducing their numbers. At a minimum, feral cats who are TNRed are spayed or neutered so they can no longer reproduce, vaccinated against diseases, and surgically ear-tipped on one ear (ear-tipping is the universally-recognized sign of a cat who has been TNRed). Dedicated caretakers feed and provide shelter for TNRed cats, monitor the TNRed cats for sickness and remove new cats for TNR if feral or possible adoption if tame.

However before implementing the TNR strategy the CoGH SPCA will as far as practically possible test feral cats for diseases such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukemia Virus (FLV). This is important to prevent the spread of this deadly disease to other feral cats as well as domestic cats. This action helps to create healthy feral cat colonies, managed by a knowledgeable and active volunteer feral cat colony controller.

## **Why can't animal welfare groups rescue feral cats?**

Many organisations, including the SPCA already care for and try to find homes for hundreds of lost, injured, abandoned and relinquished pet cats.

If the SPCA receives complaint calls or calls of concern from the public we will attempt to humanely trap and remove feral cats after checking with the network of individuals who manage feral cat colonies around Cape Town. The CoGH SPCA also provides information and hires traps to citizens interested in humanely trapping feral cats. If there is a local group helping feral cats, the SPCA may refer callers to that group.

Feral cats brought to the SPCA, especially those who cannot be identified as members of a known TNRed colony, are likely to be put down right away or after a mandatory holding period, once they have been assessed by the veterinarian. This is because it is difficult to accurately identify a feral cat without a holding period, yet safely caring for a feral cat in a typical shelter cage, is very stressful for a feral cat. In addition, if space is limited at the shelter, an adoptable cat may be put down to make room to hold a feral cat.

## **What are problems associated with unneutered/unspayed feral cats?**

A colony of unneutered/unspayed feral cats can produce a number of problems, including:

1. A growing population of cats;
2. Frequent and loud noise from fighting and mating behavior;
3. Strong foul odors from unneutered male cats spraying to mark their territory;
4. Flea infestations;

5. Visible suffering from dying kittens and injured adults;
6. Disease transmission to domestic cats;
7. Savaging domestic cats' food.

In addition, the shelters in a community with a large, unneutered feral cat population may experience:

1. Higher intake rates of cats into shelters due to the rescue of feral kittens and the capture of feral adults;
2. Higher euthanasia rates for all cats due to the unadoptability of feral adults and the necessity to euthanize adoptable animals due to limited cage space;
3. Higher animal control costs due to trapping efforts and/or costs associated with caring for and euthanizing feral cats;
4. A constant rate of nuisance complaints about feral cats.

### **Why doesn't simply removing feral cats from an area work to reduce their numbers and nuisance behavior?**

There are many reasons why feral cat problems are rarely solved by efforts to trap and remove them. Feral cats live at a certain location because it offers food and shelter. If a colony is removed, some feral cats from surrounding colonies may move in to take advantage of the newly available resources. The cycle of reproduction and nuisance behavior begins all over again.

If all the cats in a colony are not trapped, then the ones left behind tend to have more kittens. In addition, more kittens will survive because there are fewer cats competing for the available food. The population will continue to increase until the level that can be supported by the available food and shelter is reached.

Other factors which usually make removing feral cats ineffective include:

1. The lack of cooperation of the cats' caretakers—the only people who really know the cats' numbers and patterns and who can control whether or not they're hungry enough to enter a baited trap
2. The unwillingness of volunteers to trap cats who face an uncertain fate upon capture
3. The lack of animal control resources available to accomplish this task
4. The difficulty of catching all the cats in a colony
5. The ongoing abandonment of unaltered pet cats that can also repopulate a vacated territory. Trap and remove will only result in a temporary reduction in the numbers of feral cats in a given area.

## **What can I do to help feral cats?**

Helping feral cats can be very rewarding. There are many options for you to be involved. If there are one or more feral cats in your area that does not have a caretaker, you can become their caretaker. Feral cat caretakers practice Trap-Neuter-Return, feed, provide shelter, monitor the cats for any problems, trap new cats that arrive. If the new cats are feral, they are TNRed; if they are kittens young enough to be socialized or tame lost or abandoned pet cats, they are evaluated for adoption.

It's important to sterilise your own cats to prevent them mating, often resulting in unwanted and abandoned kittens.

Don't tempt feral cats to your property by leaving out food scraps. It could cause disturbances and fighting between feral and domestic cats.

For more information on how to help feral cats or to get help with feral cats contact the CoGH SPCA Inspectorate on 021 700 4158/9 or email Brett on [wildlife@spca-ct.co.za](mailto:wildlife@spca-ct.co.za)