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Trap-Neuter-Return: Why to Return and Not Adopt

Felis Catus, the domestic cat that plays a pivotal role in our lives, is born and lives in a broad range of circumstances, from pampered house cat to wildest of feral cats. Because cats in differing environments all look so similar, it is easy to imagine that a feral cat is, or wants to be, a creature much like the cat curled up on your sofa. In truth, feral cats are very different from the cats we easily share our homes with. Feral cats are closer to being wildlife than pets.

Alley Cat Allies (ACA) knows of committed caregivers who invest all available resources to provide indoor homes for the feral cats they manage in an attempt to tame them. It is, unfortunately, a time-consuming project with a very low rate of success. And even when a feral cat does “tame up,” he bonds only to the caregiver who brought him in—almost never to other humans or homes.

This is one reason why ACA does not encourage attempts to adopt adult feral cats. To understand other reasons, first let's explore the nature of outdoor cats.

Free-Roaming Does Not Equal Feral

A common misconception among some caregivers and much of the public is that all outdoor or free-roaming cats are feral cats. In fact, the free-roaming cat population consists of many categories of domestic cats, from roaming household pets to truly feral cats who exist independent of humans.

The “Touch Barrier” diagram, on the next page, shows where cats with different natures and living in different circumstances

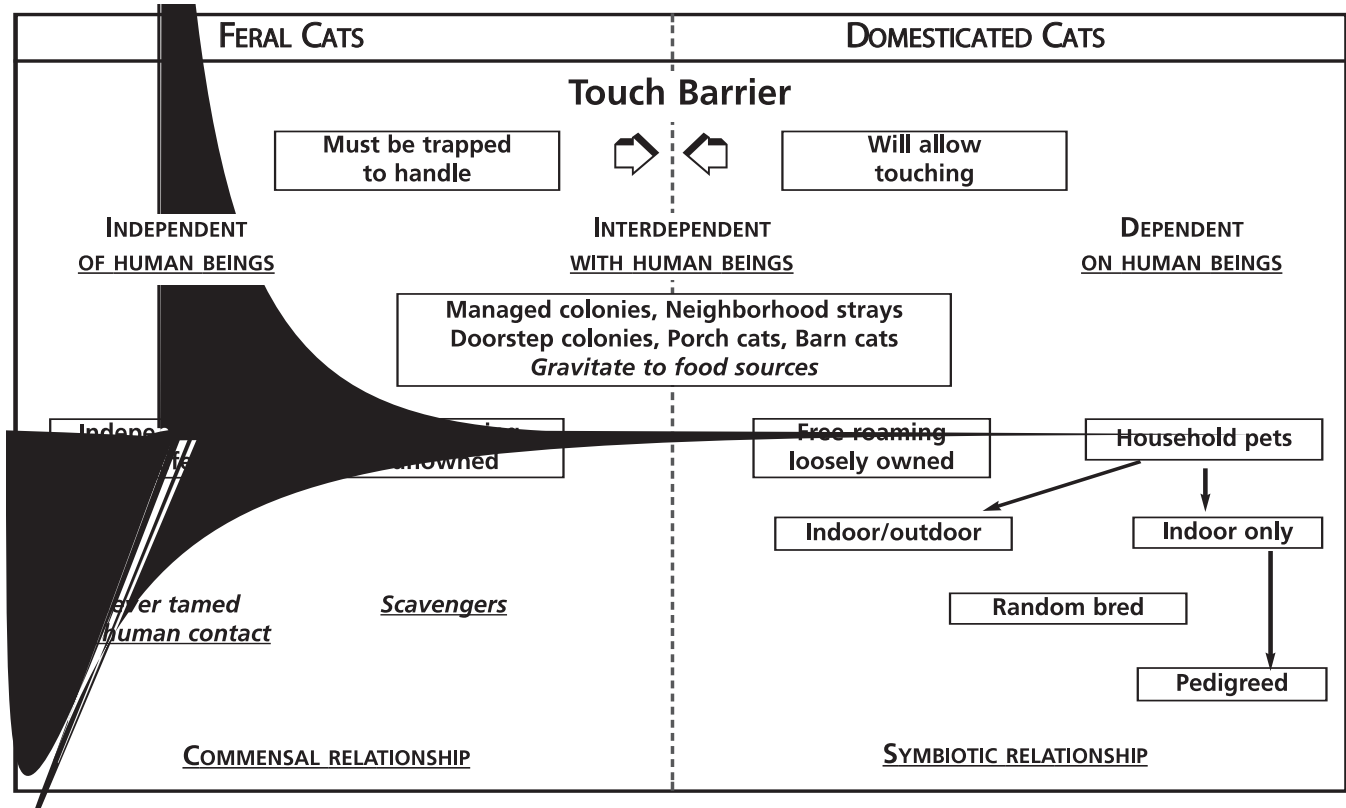
fit on the scale from household cat to feral cat. Three quarters of the cats in this diagram spend some or all of their time outdoors. Half of the cats—those to the left of the Touch Barrier—display wariness of human contact and must be trapped to handle. This group includes both strays—adult cats that once lived with human families and in many cases can

FERAL CAT—A feral cat is an unsocialized cat. Either she was born outside and has never lived with a human family, or she is a house cat that strayed from home and overtime has become profoundly distrustful and afraid of humans. Adult feral cats are usually impossible to tame and are not suited to cohabiting with people. They live in family groups called colonies that form near a source of food and shelter. Feral cats can survive almost anywhere and are found worldwide.

STRAY CAT—A domestic cat that strayed from home and became lost or was abandoned. Because a stray cat was once a companion animal, he or she can usually be re-socialized and placed in an adoptive home.

TRAP-NEUTER-RETURN (TNR)—A nonlethal sterilization method to reduce the number of feral cats in the environment both immediately and for the long term. A comprehensive, ongoing program in which stray and feral cats already living outdoors in cities, towns, and rural areas are humanely trapped, then evaluated, vaccinated, and sterilized by veterinarians. Kittens and tame (stray) cats are adopted into good homes. Healthy adult feral cats are returned to their familiar habitat under the lifelong care of volunteers. Cats that are ill or injured beyond recovery are not returned to the environment.

THE TOUCH BARRIER SEPARATES FERAL FROM DOMESTICATED CATS



Adapted from Miller, Joan. *The domestic cat: Perspective on the nature and diversity of cats.* Journal of the American Veterinary Association, Vol 208, No. 4, February 15, 1996

return to such a life—and feral cats—“independent wildlife”—the cats that belong in their outdoor homes. Strays and feral cats often look and act much alike when first trapped. This is why we must carefully assess each cat to determine his true nature and what his future should be.

The Dynamics of Taming

Why do humans feel compelled to provide indoor homes for feral cats, and why do the cats resist these good intentions? It is inherent in human nature to want to nurture and care for those we perceive to be in need—to make them warmer, cozier, safer, and therefore happier. It is an admirable trait, but not always appropriate. The impulse to bring every feral cat “in from the cold”

reflects our human needs, but it isn’t best for the cat or what the cat wants. Feral cats have lived their entire lives without direct human contact other than, if they are fortunate, daily feeding and monitoring by a caregiver. Their arsenal of survival instincts includes wariness of humans in general and a sharp fear of confinement. A key component of a feral cat’s security is his ability to flee from perceived danger.

Even if you have fed a feral cat for a long time and he has come to trust you in an outdoor setting, he will lose that trust when confined and it may never be regained. Being forced into a house or other structure can be the most frightening experience possible for a feral cat. He may appear to acclimate, or at least may stop hissing and cringing, but he is never at ease and never stops looking for a way to escape. The

stress of such confinement can harm the cat's physical and mental health.

A feral cat's home is where he has spent his entire life. Feral cats form strong bonds with one another and with their home territory, bonds that define their daily existence. It may be difficult to accept that, despite the strong human-animal bond you have formed with the cats, their animal-animal bonds and animal-territory bonds are stronger and more relevant to their well-being. They may be warm indoors, but they are content outdoors.

Another factor that inspires some people to want to tame the feral cats they care for is the misperception that feral cats live short, miserable lives. This myth has been swallowed whole by too many groups, including some of the most prominent animal organizations in the country.

The truth is that the well-being of feral cats is most compromised by behaviors associated with mating and giving birth to endless litters of kittens. Spaying and neutering significantly changes the picture. Male cats no longer fight and roam. Female cats no longer bear kittens. Vaccination ensures a higher level of health. Feral cats in managed colonies frequently live 10 years and longer.

Nurturing Through Fostering and Trap-Neuter-Return

Where, then, can a caregiver's desire to nurture best be expressed? Within a Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) program. A major and critically important component of TNR is socializing and adopting kittens and adult stray cats. When given individual love and attention, feral kittens up to about 8 weeks of age can usually be fully socialized to become household cats. Neonatal kittens accidentally separated from their mothers or discovered in a location dangerous for newborns require bottle-feeding to survive. Adult strays—cats who for one reason or another lost their homes—can often be re-socialized and re-homed. Fostering kittens and strays is an invaluable contribution to the process. It is also the best use of resources.

From *ALLY: the Newsletter of the Alliance for Animals*, Vol. 11, No. 2:

"Some people say we should neuter and release feral cats. But they can't mean these cats, these beautiful cats we've been feeding, who are coming to meet us at mealtimes, who even seem to know their names. These cats could be tamed, if someone would just take them in and work with them. We already have quite a few at home and we have been working with them. Some of them are doing great, and we are sure we can find them homes. If only someone would just give them a chance... it is cruel to leave them outside."

It is an off-heard story. We are sure we know what is best. Cold is bad. No one should have to live out in the cold. We mean well when we take these feral cats in. We mean well when we expect them to share our homes and lifestyles, join our other feline companions, enjoy our food, our shelter. It may take time, but surely they will come to recognize that we care about them, and mean them no harm. Surely they will come to thank us for rescuing them from their harrowing lives outside....

But it is we who do not understand. It is we who mistake our own needs for those of the cat; it is we who need them, not they who need us. We need to feel important, we need to feel special—we have that "special" touch that will tame a feral cat. We have "saved" them, we are truly compassionate, even heroic. We give up hours of our day to sit with them, nurture them.

We don't see that we are terrorizing them, forcing them into an alien environment because it fits our definition of what is best.

We don't see what is really special—the essential "catness" of the feral cat, her independence, natural wildness, and strength.

The feral cat's life may in fact be shorter than that of the domestic cat on our bed, but it is her life, her relationships with her comrades and her environment, her world. Her every instinct tells her to avoid the human, avoid confinement. She tries desperately to escape from us, to get back to the world she knows and understands. If we understand the cat at all, if we care about her at all, if we can rise above the human need to possess and control, we must let her go. We can cherish her from a distance, admire her spirit, celebrate her life for what it is, help her by honoring her needs as they truly are. Sterilize her, protect from disease, build her a shelter, educate the community about her, but do not try to "own" her. Give her freedom, peace of mind, and dignity.

Donna Bishop, *Founder, Alliance for Animals*

The Greatest Possible Good for the Greatest Number of Cats

The goals of the feral cat movement are:

- to change the way feral cats are routinely treated in this country;
- to recognize their right to live and their niche in the environment;
- to improve the quality of their lives through spay/neuter; and
- to humanely, nonlethally, and substantially reduce their numbers.

In other words: to save and improve the lives of as many feral cats as we can.

Getting ahead of the overpopulation problem through adoption is not possible. Feral cats breed much faster than we can ever tame them; they die in shelters in far greater numbers than can ever be adopted. Even if adoption were the most desirable course, resources do not exist to socialize and adopt the tens of millions of feral cats in this country.

And yet, with the time and energy that goes into trying to socialize one adult feral cat, dozens of cats could be sterilized and dozens of friendly stray cats and kittens could be placed for adoption, thereby having a real impact on saving cats and improving their lives.

It is time to frankly examine our reasons for working on behalf of feral cats. Even caregivers who are involved only with

HOW CAN I TELL IF A CAT IS STRAY OR FERAL?

Observe the cat's appearance and behavior. A stray cat is likely to approach you, although usually not close enough for you to touch him. He may be skittish, but if you put food down a stray cat will likely start to eat it right away. A stray cat is often vocal, sometimes talking insistently, and may look disheveled, as if unused to dealing with conditions on the street. A stray cat may be seen at all hours of the day.

A feral cat is silent, will not approach humans unknown to him, and generally will be seen only from dusk to dawn, unless extraordinarily hungry and foraging for food. A feral cat has adapted to conditions and is likely to appear well-groomed. If you put food down for a feral cat, he will wait until you move away from the area before approaching the food.

the cats they feed on a daily basis are, nevertheless, part of the big picture, of the dynamic movement to help cats that began some 15 years ago in the United States.

If the goal truly is to bring the greatest good to the greatest number of cats, then the only way to reach that goal is through TNR. There is no alternative. Because more kittens are born every day. ■