



Fact Sheet

FERAL CAT HEALTH ANALYSIS: LIVING HEALTHY OUTDOORS

Feral cats—or cats not socialized to humans—are healthy and content in their outdoor homes. Research shows they do not suffer harsh lives or pose a health risk to other cats.

For thousands of years, cats have lived outdoors alongside humans. Just because they don't live in our homes doesn't mean they are 'homeless.' Yet the current animal control system and even misguided animal welfare organizations believe that taking feral cats to shelters, where nearly 100% of them will be killed, is more humane than leaving cats to live outdoors. The science—and the opinion of most Americans—tells a different story.

Feral cats don't suffer outdoors.

One prominent animal rights organization falsely states that “horrific fates” await feral cats, like diseases, injuries, or human cruelty.¹ But these claims are based on isolated incidents and not supported by scientific evidence.

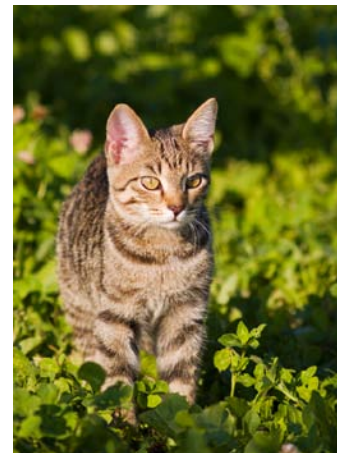
In fact, the research points the other way—a 2006 study found that of 103,643 stray and feral cats examined in spay/neuter clinics in six states from 1993 to 2004, less than 1% of those cats needed to be euthanized due to debilitating conditions, trauma, or infectious diseases.²

Feral cats live full, healthy lives outdoors—there is no reason for them to be killed in shelters.

Feral cats are just as healthy as pet cats.

Feral cats have equally low rates of disease as the cats who share your home. Opponents of Trap-Neuter-Return claim that rabies and other viruses such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) are “common” among outdoor cats, but again, the facts debunk those claims.³

In 2008, only 294 cases of rabies were reported in cats, both pet and feral.⁴ That's just 4.3% of all the rabies cases reported in animals that year. Feral cats do not pose a rabies risk to humans—there hasn't been a confirmed cat-to-human rabies transmission in more than 30 years. The number one source of rabies in the United States is wildlife—accounting for more than 90% of rabies cases in animals. Since feral cats involved in Trap-Neuter-Return programs are vaccinated and therefore cannot acquire or transmit the virus, they pose no threat to humans or other animals.



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As for FIV, a 2008 report found almost equally low rates of FIV and feline leukemia (FeLV) in feral cats (4.3%) and outdoor pet cats (5.8%).⁵ A study of seven Trap-Neuter-Return programs from 2006 produced similar data: only 5.3% of the cats tested positive for one of those diseases.⁶

Most importantly, research confirms that feral cats are neither breeding grounds for disease nor a health threat to communities in which they live. After testing feral cats in Northern Florida for FIV, FeLV, and nine other infectious organisms, a 2002 study concluded that “feral cats assessed in this study posed no greater risk to human beings or other cats than pet cats.”^{7,8}

Feral cats don't spread disease or get sick any more often than pet cats—they deserve to live out their lives just like other cats do.

Feral cats live healthy outdoor lives. Trap-Neuter-Return helps.

Cats cared for through Trap-Neuter-Return have healthy life spans. In 2003, a long-term study of a Trap-Neuter-Return program noted that 83% of the cats present at the end of the observation period had been there for more than six years.⁹

The lean physique of some feral cats sometimes leads animal control and other groups to claim that the cats are starving or ill, but a 2002 study found that feral cats have healthy body weights and fat distribution.¹⁰

If they may be a little leaner than the cat on your couch, it is the result of a different lifestyle, not because they're suffering or sick. Neutering feral cats can further improve weight gain and coat condition— just one more of the many ways Trap-Neuter-Return improves cats' lives.

It's time to stop the killing.

Current animal control and shelter policies don't just kill healthy cats—they violate the humane ethic of most Americans. A 2007 study by Alley Cat Allies¹¹ found that 81% of people polled consider it more humane to leave a cat outside where it is than to have the cat caught and then killed. Unfortunately, that is exactly what happens to more than 70% of all cats brought to shelters, and nearly 100% of feral cats.

The pounds and shelters say these animals are “euthanized.” But an animal is only euthanized when she is terminally ill or untreatably injured. Using the word “euthanasia” masks what really happens to healthy cats in pounds and shelters—they are killed. Amidst all the false claims, the sad truth is this: the number one documented cause of death for cats in the U.S. is being killed in a shelter.

Feral cats live healthy, natural lives outdoors, just as cats have done for thousands of years. Removing them from their outdoor home and into shelters is a death sentence— and there is nothing humane about it.

¹ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, “Animal Rights Uncompromised: Feral Cats,” <http://www.peta.org/campaigns/ar-feralcats.asp> (accessed April 26, 2010).

² Wallace, Jennifer L, and Julie K Levy, “Population Characteristics of Feral Cats Admitted to Seven Trap-Neuter-Return Programs in the United States,” *Journal of Feline Medicine And Surgery* 8 (2006): 279-284.

³ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, “Animal Rights Uncompromised: Feral Cats,” <http://www.peta.org/campaigns/ar-feralcats.asp> (accessed April 26, 2010).

⁴ Blanton, Jesse D, et al., “Rabies Surveillance in the United States During 2008,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 235, no. 6 (2009): 676-689.

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⁵ Levy, Julie K, et al., “Seroprevalence of Feline Leukemia Virus and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus Infection Among Cats in North America and Risk Factors for Seropositivity,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 228, no. 3 (2006): 371-376.

⁶ Wallace, Jennifer L, and Julie K Levy, “Population Characteristics of Feral Cats Admitted to Seven Trap-Neuter-Return Programs in the United States,” *Journal of Feline Medicine And Surgery* 8 (2006): 279-284.

⁷ Luria, Brian J, et al., “Prevalence of Infectious Diseases in Feral Cats in Northern Florida,” *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* 6 (2004): 287-296.

⁸ Lee, Irene T, et al., “Prevalence of Feline Leukemia Virus Infection and Serum Antibodies Against Feline Immunodeficiency Virus in Unowned Free-Roaming Cats,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 220, no. 5 (2002): 620-622.

⁹ Levy, Julie K, et al., “Evaluation of the Effect of a Long-Term Trap-Neuter-Return and Adoption Program on a Free-Roaming Cat Population,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 222, no. 1 (2003): 42-46.

¹⁰ Scott, Karen C, et al., “Body Condition of Feral Cats and the Effect of Neutering,” *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 5, no. 3 (2002): 203-213.

¹¹ Chu, Karyen, et al., “Population Characteristics and Neuter Status of Cats Living in Households in the United States,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 234, no. 8 (2009): 1023-1030.