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THE FACTS ON CATS

It's the time of year when cats show up with increased frequency in backyards, parking lots and – with certainty – school grounds. What can we do to aid the growing problem of feral and free-roaming cats? Are we perpetuating problems for our feline friends? What are the health risks associated with feral cats? Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is as useful for 4-legged critters as the 6 or 8-legged ones. It may provide at least some of the answers to questions about feral and free-roaming cats.

What is a feral or free-roaming cat?

Feral cats were not socialized to humans at an appropriate age. The key window for kitten socialization is birth to 9 weeks, thereafter taking much longer. Consequently, feral cats will not likely ever become a domesticated, indoor pet.

Free-roaming cats are previously-owned (socialized) strays that were abandoned or became runaways. If captured, they can often be adopted as an indoor pet.

Feral and free-roaming cats can have enormous impacts on the ecology of both urban and rural environments. Even when provided with food from humans, a cat's natural instinct compels it to hunt. As a result, native animals can undergo radical population changes:

1. predation of reptiles, birds, small mammals and amphibians;
2. competition with native predators;
3. introduction or perpetuation of diseases and parasites.

How do feral and free-roaming cats affect us?

Feral and free-roaming cats may carry a variety of parasites and diseases that are normally treated or prevented in pet cats. Intestinal parasites were found to be as abundant as 89% in one study on feral cats (Labarthe et al, 2004). Feral and free-roaming kittens typically experience a higher rate of parasites than adults, also.



It is possible to contract a health condition from feral and free-roaming cats, either via direct contact or contact with fecal contamination. Given children's developing immune system, their inhibition with mouthing objects, and their exposure through outdoor play, they may be more disposed to contracting a condition from an animal than adults would be.

Some health concerns associated with cats include:

- Rabies
- Hookworms
- Tapeworm
- Plague
- Cat scratch disease
- *Toxoplasma*
- *Giardia*
- Ringworm

Increasingly, school districts are adopting policies for managing feral and free-roaming cats. In spite of the health concerns associated with cats around schools (living under portables, utilizing sandboxes for litter, etc.), feral and free-roaming cats remain primarily an issue of the heart. Solutions and answers are controversial. However, everyone does seem to agree on this: *feral and free-roaming cats can be prevented with community education and cooperation.*

Feral and free-roaming cats in Arizona

In Maricopa County alone, 60,000 cats and dogs are euthanized per year. The reason? It requires space, staff, funds, and other resources to accommodate the animals. The resources of these organizations and agencies especially fall short of demand in the spring, when more than a hundred kittens may be brought to a single clinic each day. Experts estimate there are currently around 500,000 feral and free-roaming cats in Maricopa County alone, and only 10-12% are neutered.

To avoid euthanizing adoptable cats, "no-kill" shelters stop accepting new animals once they reach capacity (a full facility and full temporary foster homes). Other organizations and agencies – whose policies do not allow them to turn animals away – resort to euthanasia. Neither county agencies, shelters, nor the Humane Society can accommodate the overwhelming hoards of homeless animals roaming our streets.

The problem begins with humans. Well-intentioned families and individuals get a cat and, for whatever reason, lose it or leave it (especially when they move). An un-spayed female in this situation may produce up to 2-3 litters per year. Unless the litters are caught in time, the off-spring become feral cats who go on to reproduce as well. The result: tens of thousands of feral cats. **A free-roaming cat – once a pet – can thus give rise to a mind-boggling number of feral cats.** An extremely conservative estimate follows: a single pregnant female can result in over 40,000 cats in 7 years. Clearly, the feral and free-roaming cat problem is largely a case of human irresponsibility.



A fix/fix situation

IPM concepts include education and awareness, prevention, and habitat modification. When comprehensively applied, these efforts create long-term solutions to critter problems. These techniques also help reduce existing numbers of feral and free-roaming cats humanely...

1. Prevention techniques include:

- **Awareness and education** of school staff (homeowners educate neighbors). Use this document and others like it to highlight the problem as a human one, and their role in helping address it.
- **Spay/neuter (i.e., “fix”) your cats**, and encourage others to do so. A fixed pet that escapes or becomes lost won't perpetuate the problem by breeding. There are now many low-cost options for spaying/neutering pets.
- **Spay/neuter feral and free-roaming cats** around your home/office/school. It is very important to keep in mind: if you “trap, neuter, release” (TNR) cats in your area, be well-read on the techniques – especially release options. If you simply remove cats, it may only be a temporary fix if valuable resources are available (food/water/shelter). What can result is a “vacuum effect” whereby other cats move in, possibly in even greater numbers. Traps, guidance, and resources can be found in the websites below. For a fuller discussion, also see Alley Cat Allies at www.Alleycat.org.
- **Keep your cats indoors**. This can be excruciating for some owners and formerly free-roaming cats. A variety of techniques may help detract and deter from their desire to go out, including patience and time. Your cat's health/life and local wildlife will significantly benefit.
- **Adopt a cat**. Local shelters, organizations and agencies offer adoption, and are increasingly omnipresent at major pet stores. Also consider adopting from peers who'd otherwise turn animals in. Note that spring through summer, the chances of euthanasia are higher. Either way, be sure you are up for the commitment: a cat can live 20 years plus, and cost on average \$30 to \$100 per month. Cats also require regular grooming, extra household cleaning, vet checks, training, etc. While lower-maintenance than some other pets, cats are still a significant commitment.
- **Volunteer or donate**. Consult your local Humane Society or animal shelter to see how you can help address their many resource needs.

- ### 2. Habitat modification techniques
- discourage cats from your school grounds or property (e.g. secure skirting around temporary portable classrooms, get rid of sand pits, in favor of bark chips, etc.). These and other deterrents are described in detail in the AZ Humane Society's behavioral fact sheet “Discouraging Free Roaming Cats”:
<http://www.azhumane.org/artman2/publish/tips/behaviorinfo.shtml>.

AZ Feral and Free-roaming Cat Resources

The list of local rescue organizations and the services they provide are long. The organizations below are a small sample of our state's resources; the list includes just a few of the services each offers... Please visit their websites to learn more.

- ❖ **Altered Tails** (which now includes AZ Alley Cats)
<http://www.alteredtails.org/>
 - YOU trap, they neuter. Mobile “fixing” units.
 - Traps available for loan.
 - Referral to other mobile spay/neuter clinics.
- ❖ **Arizona Humane Society**. <http://www.azhumane.org/>
 - Comprehensive education & resources for current and would-be pet owners.
 - Low-cost mobile spay and neuter clinics.
- ❖ **Maricopa County Animal Care and Control**.
<http://www.maricopa.gov/Pets/>
 - Low-cost spay/neutering; vouchers for free service (those that qualify).
 - Newsletter

Arizona Children's Environmental Health Coalition



Check out the new **University of Arizona Urban IPM website**: <http://cals.arizona.edu/urbanipm/>

Website renovations will continue through this year, but currently include resources for urban/school/child care facilities:

- ✓ Pest presses & monthly school IPM updates
- ✓ Toolbox for implementing IPM
- ✓ Arizona laws
- ✓ School IPM list serv sign-up

Please visit the website, send us your feedback, and check back for the additions!

Information sources:

1. Altered Tails (Special thanks to Cheryl Weiner) and those resources listed above.
2. Center for Disease Control: Healthy Cats, Healthy People.
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/animals/cats.htm>
3. Labarthe, Norma, Maria Lucia Serrao, Ana Maria R. Ferreira, Nubia K. O. Almeida, Jorge Guerrero. A survey of gastrointestinal helminthes in cats of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro. *Veterinary Parasitology* 123 (2004) 133–139.



"Of all God's creatures, there is only one that cannot be made slave of the leash. That one is the cat. If man could be crossed with the cat it would improve the man, but it would deteriorate the cat." - Mark Twain

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