

The HSUS's Position on Cats

A collaborative approach to giving all cats the best life possible



The current approach to managing outdoor cats isn't working. The HSUS is committed to finding a way to serve the interests of cats, wildlife, and communities. The HSUS

Cats are the most popular companion animal in the U.S., with more than 86 million of them living in nearly 39 million American households.

Tens of millions more unowned cats live outdoors and usually rely on people to provide them with food and shelter.

Their sociability ranges from truly unsocialized feral cats to friendly strays cats who have become lost or have been abandoned.

The Humane Society of the United States believes that every cat deserves a life free from hunger or thirst, fear and distress, discomfort, pain, injury, or disease, and that cats at risk for these are our responsibility to care for. Regardless of whether they are owned or not, cats who are outdoors are the leading cause of cat overpopulation in communities and can be a conservation threat to at least some species of wildlife on a case-by-case basis.

Owned Cats

Unowned Cats

Cats and Wildlife

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Owned Cats

The decisions people make for their cats are important for their cats' health and welfare; they also play a role in cat overpopulation as a whole. We urge all cat owners to take the following steps:

Have your cats spayed or neutered. Cats can begin reproducing as early as five months of age, so they should be sterilized by that age or younger whenever possible. Cats can have more than one litter each year, and each litter adds to the millions of cats across the country competing for homes. Close to two million cats are euthanized each year in shelters and animal control facilities nationwide. In addition to population control, sterilization can also

eliminate unpleasant behaviors of intact cats, such as male cats fighting and female cats going into their reproductive season.

Keep your cats safe indoors. Indoor cats live longer, tend to be healthier, and can avoid some of the predators, injuries, parasites, and communicable diseases to which outdoor cats may be exposed. Indoor cats do not kill birds and other wildlife. An outdoor enclosure or walk on a harness and leash can provide a cat with safe outdoor access, if desired, although cats do not require outdoor access to live full and happy lives.

Put visible identification on your cats at all times. Accidental escape is a common risk for indoor cats. Only about 2 percent of lost cats who enter animal shelters are claimed by their families. A collar with visible identification attached is the best life insurance you can buy. Cats can easily and safely wear collars with identification, and a microchip is a good backup means of identification. Microchips alone are not enough, since it's the visible ID that will immediately alert people that the cat is owned.

Provide regular veterinary care. All cats, even cats who never interact with other animals or venture outdoors, should be examined at least once a year and receive vaccinations against rabies and other diseases, as recommended by their veterinarian. Regular veterinary visits, as well as preventative care, such as keeping cats indoors and providing good nutrition, are key to ensuring the highest quality of life for cats.

Unowned Cats

The most pressing cat issue in the U.S. is the large population of unsterilized outdoor cats. This results in many cats without permanent/conventional homes living in outdoor populations, quickly producing ongoing generations of cats. These cats may be feral, meaning they do not willingly interact with humans, while some are semi- or formerly-owned, or otherwise friendly cats who have been lost or abandoned. Until the day when the population has been reduced and all cats live in loving homes, The HSUS supports and promotes humane management of outdoor cat populations.

To this end, we support Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) and similar sterilization programs, legislation that allows for and supports non-lethal population control, and coalition-based approaches that involve community leaders, citizens, and stakeholders to implement effective community cat management programs. Programs that attempt to use lethal control to eliminate cat populations are inhumane, ineffective, and wasteful of scarce resources.

In standard TNR practice, cats are humanely trapped and, if healthy, spay/neutered, rabies vaccinated, eartipped (for identification), and returned to their community. These programs have shown evidence of stabilizing cat numbers that eventually dwindle to zero as the cats naturally pass away. The HSUS believes that the humane reduction and eventual elimination of unowned cat populations should be the end goal for all TNR participants and supporters. TNR should be considered a humane means to an end, not a method of permanently maintaining outdoor cat populations.

Cats in Shelters

In many areas of the U.S., unlimited admission of cats is not a legal mandate for shelters, yet millions of community (unowned and outdoor) cats are regularly admitted and, despite strong efforts by shelters, most cats do not make it out alive. Even though large numbers of cats are euthanized in shelters, the numbers do not come close to reaching a tipping point to decrease outdoor cat populations. This results in a cycle of intake and euthanasia for a small percentage of the overall cat population in a given community, with little to no impact on total numbers.

Managing cat populations in this way is not working. Instead, we as a society need to focus on finding and deploying solutions that will work - ones that will serve the interests of cats, wildlife, and communities. Shelters may consider reducing intake of healthy cats they cannot place into loving homes and can effectively use those freed-up funds to address cat overpopulation; whether that be through accessible spay/neuter programs; behavioral resources for people struggling with their owned cats; assistance with pet food, vaccines, and other services; or TNR and other non-lethal population control strategies.

Cats and Wildlife

Predation by outdoor cats on birds and other wildlife is a real and legitimate concern. While The HSUS believes that outdoor cats are entitled to protection, it also believes that wildlife populations need to be protected from cats. That's

one of the reasons we actively promote TNR, and why we have been involved in programs such as the removal of feral cats from San Nicholas Island, Calif., in an effort to balance the needs of all animals, and not promote one species at the expense of others. The HSUS does not support managed colonies in ecologically sensitive areas or in areas where the cats are at imminent risk of harm, such as demolition sites or areas where nuisance complaints have escalated and remain unresolved.

The HSUS supports collaborative efforts, such as coalition-based initiatives, to humanely reduce outdoor cat populations while protecting threatened and endangered wildlife populations. The scope of the problem is so large, both geographically and in terms of the sheer number of cats, that a triage approach is needed to protect the most vulnerable wildlife populations, such as endangered species on islands. Also, incremental progress must be made to address harm done to all species of wild animals vulnerable to cat predation, as they all hold inherent value. Through wildlife-sensitive-area mapping, cat-colony relocation or feeding modification, the establishment of appropriate sanctuaries, and other innovative solutions, the negative impacts can be lessened and eventually eliminated.

Collaboration/Humane Communities

Each community is different, and there is no effective one-size-fits-all response to managing community (unowned) cats. Stakeholders must work together to create programs that address specific needs and maximize available resources in their community.

Communities will succeed when they pursue a combination of the following:

- Truly accessible spay/neuter and TNR services for pet and community cats
- Support and implementation of best practices for managing community cat colonies
- Pet food pantries, behavior assistance, and other programs to help people keep their cats in their homes
- Shelter and rescue innovations and partnerships to increase cat adoptions
- Shelter policy changes to reduce the intake of healthy community cats when euthanasia is the likely outcome
- Public education and outreach
- Adequate, enforceable cat-related ordinances and state laws

Of course, successful community programs will rely on sufficient government funding as well as private/public partnerships and significant volunteerism to support these broadly beneficial programs.

Conclusion

While the task ahead of us is complex, it is not impossible. Great efforts are already underway in a variety of cities, towns, and islands across our country and the globe. America's favorite pet deserves to live a long, healthy, and humane life, and The HSUS is dedicated to making that a reality.