

FERAL AND FREE-RANGING DOMESTIC CATS

Position Statement

Free and free-ranging domestic cats are exotic species to North America. Exotic species are recognized as one of the most widespread and serious threats to the integrity of native wildlife populations and natural ecosystems. Exotic species present special challenges for wildlife managers because their negative impacts are poorly understood by the general public, many exotic species have become such an accepted component of the environment that many people regard them as "natural," some exotic species have advocacy groups that promote their continued presence, and few policies and laws deal directly with their control. Perhaps no issue has captured more of the challenges for contemporary wildlife management than the impacts of feral or free-ranging human companion or domestic animals. The domestic cat is the companion animal that recently has attracted the most attention for its impact on wildlife species.

Domestic cats originated from an ancestral wild species, the European and African wild cat (*Felis silvestris*). The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) is now considered a separate species. The estimated numbers of pet cats in urban and rural regions of the United States have grown from 30 million in 1970 to nearly 65 million in 2000. Reliable estimates of the present total cat population are not available. Nationwide, approximately 30% of households have cats. In rural areas, approximately 60% of households have cats.

The impact of domestic cats on wildlife is difficult to quantify. However, a growing body of literature strongly suggests that domestic cats are a significant factor in the mortality of small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Because free-ranging cats often receive food from humans, they can reach population levels that may create areas of abnormally high predation rates on wildlife. When the wildlife prey is a threatened or endangered species, the result may be extirpation or extinction. Effects of cat predation are most pronounced in island settings (both actual islands and island of habitat), where prey populations are already low or stressed by other factors, or in natural areas where cat colonies are established. Competition with native predators, disease implications for wildlife populations, and pet owners' attitudes toward wildlife and wildlife management also are important issues.

Extensive popular debate over absolute numbers or types of prey taken is not productive. The number of cats is undeniably large. Even if conservative estimates of prey taken are considered, the number of prey animals killed is immense. Feeding cats does not deter them from killing wildlife as they do not always eat what they kill. Humans introduced cats to North America and they must be responsible for the control and removal of cats that prey on wildlife.

The policy of The Wildlife Society in regard to feral and free-ranging domestic cats is to:

1. Strongly support and encourage the humane elimination of feral cat colonies.
2. Support the passage and enforcement of local and state ordinances prohibiting the public feeding of feral cats, especially on public lands, and releasing of unwanted pet or feral cats into the wild.
3. Strongly support educational programs and materials that call for all pet cats to be kept indoors, in outdoor enclosures, or on a leash.
4. Support programs to educate and encourage pet owners to neuter or spay their cats, and encourage all pet adoption programs to require potential owners to spay or neuter their pet.
5. Support the development and dissemination of sound, helpful information on what individual cat owners can do to minimize predation by free-ranging cats.
6. Pledge to work with the conservation and animal welfare communities to educate the public about the negative impact of freeranging and feral cats on native wildlife, including birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and endangered species.
7. Support educational efforts to encourage the agricultural community to keep farm cat numbers at low, manageable levels and use alternative, environmentally safe rodent control methods.

8. Encourage researchers to develop better information on the impacts of feral and freeranging cats on native wildlife populations.
9. Recognize that cats as pets have a long association with humans, and that responsible cat owners are to be encouraged to continue caring for the animals under their control.
10. Oppose the passage of any local or state ordinances that legalize the maintenance of "managed" (trap/neuter/release) free-ranging cat colonies.

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