Community Approaches TO Feral Cats

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PROBLEMS, ALTERNATIVES, & RECOMMENDATIONS

PUBLIC POLICY SERIES

by **Margaret R. Slater**

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Humane Society Press
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I would like to acknowledge my debt to my cat, Pinwheel, for providing me with a recent exposure to different definitions of ownership. When a friend recognized Pinwheel as a neighbor's cat and told his former owner of his whereabouts, the owner was unconcerned to learn that he had been in the shelter, unclaimed, for five days prior to his adoption.

I particularly appreciate the time, knowledge, opinions, and data shared with me by many people around the country and my experiences with the many felines who gave me more insight into the life of feral (and not-so-feral) cats.

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This book is intended to provide useful information regarding feral cats; however, a word of warning is in order. Feral cats sometimes behave unpredictibly, especially when they are under stress. Caring for a feral cat inevitably involves some risk of injury to the cat, to other animals, to persons, or to property. Feral cats sometimes have hidden health or psychological problems that may cause them to react unfavorably to treatment that would otherwise be considered proper. The information provided in this book is not intended to substitute for veterinary, legal, or other professional advice. Laws regarding the treatment and disposition of animals vary from place to place, and lobbying and other forms of activism are regulated or may otherwise result in legal consequences.

The information in this book should be used with caution and in accordance with all state and local animal control laws and regulations; you must rely on your own judgment in using this book or seek professional advice. Your use of this book expressly indicates your assumption of risk of injury or other consequences resulting from interacting with animals or using any products or procedures mentioned in this book. Neither the author nor The Humane Society of the United States assumes any liability for any injury to persons or property that may result from the use of this book.

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Foreword

All domestic cats deserve loving, permanent homes with responsible caregivers who keep them safely confined and meet their special needs.

This is a belief that I hold close. It is a view shared by millions of cat lovers around the world. It is the published opinion of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). And yet, although more than 60 million cats have gently clawed their way into our homes and hearts, tens of millions more cats subsist outside of homes—abandoned, stray, or feral.

These free-roaming cats elude simple categorization, but the feral cat most embodies the failure of humans to take full responsibility for the animals they domesticated thousands of years ago. Feral cats, one or more generations removed from a happy home and too unsocialized to be placed in a home, can survive on their own. But it cannot be said that they thrive.

Almost every community has feral cats. These cats may be left alone—by ignoring them, tolerating them, or wanting to do something but looking the other way out of helplessness or ignorance—or they may be removed or managed in some way. "Managing" feral cat colonies usually means humanely trapping the cats, having them spayed or neutered and vaccinated, and then releasing them.

As with so many issues in animal protection, philosophy and pragmatism collide when considering the best options for feral cats. After all, to trap feral cats humanely only to return them to the situation from which they came is to institutionalize a system in which some cats are likely to meet a bad end. Even the sterilized, vaccinated cat living on an isolated parcel of land in a temperate climate and being fed by the most dedicated care-

giver is susceptible to a range of threats that the well-cared-for indoor cat will never face. No colony, no matter how well maintained, can protect cats from accidental or intentional injury or death, abuse, or diseases that cannot be prevented by vaccination. And, of course, the maintenance of any colony means tolerating the continued predation by cats on a variety of wildlife, both winged and furred.

As Margaret Slater characterizes it, active feral cat colony management is an interim solution, one that recognizes that the only unacceptable option is to do nothing. We cannot let cats continue to breed and suffer, leaving each successive generation of felines to live on the fringes of human existence facing shortened—and in many cases painful—lives. Sadly, that is what continues to happen in many communities where a void of knowledge, leadership, resources, and consensus leaves free-roaming cats with nary an ounce of the human protection that they need and deserve.

I hope that this book will help fill that void. Cats are mysterious to some, but the options for dealing with them should not be. Fortunately, Margaret Slater has succeeded in demystifying and defining the issues that surround feral and other free-roaming cats. Viewing these issues through the lenses of epidemiology and veterinary medicine, Slater presents and evaluates a variety of options for managing feral cat colonies, both practiced and theoretical, to inform policymakers, legislators, animal advocates, and other interested parties. Slater adds her voice to the chorus of concerned feral cat caregivers and other local activists—the field marshals of cat advocacy—who have chosen to take responsibility for these animals.

It is that message—that cats are not wild animals, but our responsibility—that resonates throughout this book. Responsibility begets obligation, which begets initiative, which begets action. Only through action, taken community by community, will we achieve a world in which every domestic cat gets the loving, safe, and permanent home that she deserves.

Martha C. Armstrong
Senior Vice President, Companion Animals and Equine Protection
The Humane Society of the United States

Introduction

1.1. Scope of This Monograph

This book is the culmination of a research project undertaken by the author and funded by The HSUS to analyze and review existing data on feral cat management and control, develop standard definitions and data collection schemes, and create a set of proposed research needs to address unanswered questions regarding the feral cat problem.

This book has been created to fill many of the gaps in stakeholders' knowledge of feral cats and how best to deal with them. These gaps are evident in the tremendous variation in communities' responses to the "feral cat problem"—from doing nothing to implementing broad-based feral cat colony management programs designed to "manage" colonies into extinction.

Whether a community addresses the problem of feral cats or not, it still has the problem. For the estimated tens of millions of free-roaming domestic cats considered to be feral, the problem is often one of premature death and some degree of suffering prior to death. Feral cats cause many concerns, including public health concerns, but the cats' suffering is the ultimate concern of The HSUS and the primary reason that The HSUS has published this book. By informing policymakers and other stakeholders about feral cat-related problems and solutions, The HSUS hopes to engage them to take enlightened, effective action.

Appendices include materials useful to humane societies, feral cat caretakers, and veterinarians, as well as sample legislative approaches and detailed case studies that illustrate approaches to active management of feral cat colonies.