

**“The Responsibility of Communities: Caring for Feral Felines”**

An Honors Thesis

by

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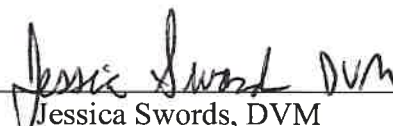
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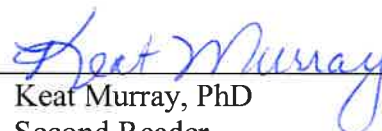
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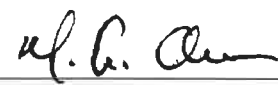
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## Abstract

The growing concerns regarding the overpopulation of feral felines in local communities and the need for more involvement to control the situation was the reason for writing this research paper. Arguments to members of the community were given as to why more people should get involved, a few reasons being it will improve the welfare and health of felines and humans, one can obtain a strong sense of accomplishment and camaraderie with neighbors, and there are many consequences to the whole ecosystem with one species being overpopulated. Suggestions for ways to control the feral feline population were also provided. In conjunction with this research-based argument essay, an event was hosted to raise more awareness for a local cat rescue with all members of the community being invited to support the rescue and provide funds for them to continue their work of trapping local strays and getting them vetted, sterilized, and adopted. Many attended to show their support and we received a vast variety of donations for the gift basket raffle. The bingo fundraiser event brought in \$1405 for the California, PA based cat rescue named Cali Cats.

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UHP Thesis

### The Responsibility of Communities: Caring for Feral Felines

During an Honors course at California University of Pennsylvania, much discussion was had about the topic and field of human-animal studies. Human-animal studies, defined by DeMello in *Animals and Society*, is the study of the interactions and relationships between human and nonhuman animals. This field is both interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary and is a newly recognized scholarly discipline. Human lives are intricately intertwined with the lives of animals and it is through the field of HAS that we can better understand this relationship and what it means for humans. I, personally, have always had a passion for animals and plan to pursue a career in the animal care field. I believe that members of their respective communities have a responsibility for improving the welfare of all animal species that inhabit it. In California specifically, my attention has been drawn to the alarming number of free-roaming felines and the far and few efforts that have been made to control this population. For the purpose of this research-based argument essay, focus will be placed on the history of animal domestication and the responsibilities local communities and society as a whole have regarding feral animals such as felines. Also, it will be argued that communities, such as that of California, PA, must work together to control local feline populations humanely by combined methods of trap, neuter, and introduction to community made sanctuaries, trap-neuter-release (TNR), and fostering to lead to adoption. The reasonings behind this

is due to the bond between human and animal, the relationships that can be built when working toward a common goal, and the many consequences of a species' overpopulation.

The domestication of animals began with the dog approximately 15,000 years ago during the Mesolithic period, also known as the Middle Stone Age. In order for an animal to be considered domesticated and more than just tamed, they must be kept for a distinct purpose, their breeding must be controlled by humans, their survival is dependent on humans, and they must develop genetic traits not found in the wild (DeMello 84). Different species of animals were domesticated for different purposes to humans. Dogs were domesticated from wolves to hunt with humans and also to protect livestock. Sheep, goats, pigs, and cows were domesticated for their meat, milk, and coats/skin. Horses were originally domesticated to feed other animals but later for riding and as 'beasts of burden', or animals used to pull carts and other heavy equipment. Even honeybees were domesticated for their honey production (Lear 2012). Cats specifically descended from types of wildcats to control mice and rat infestations. This unique relationship with humans began about 10,000-12,000 years ago in the geographic region known as the Fertile Crescent, where some of the earliest developments of human civilization occurred. With the rise of agriculture, stored grains for farming attracted rodents. Middle Eastern wildcats took advantage of this new food source and scavenged the freshly built towns. Over thousands of years, *Felis catus* evolved, known as the domesticated cat species. The first archaeological evidence of humans and cats living in close proximity was seen in a burial site in Cyprus from 9,500 years ago. Cats traveled the globe on ships as mousers throughout history, and it was toward the end of the 19th century that more Americans

began to keep cats for their company and utility. It was by the end of World War I that cats were widely accepted as house pets in the United States. Biologically, cats are the same as they were thousands of years ago and haven't undergone many evolutionary changes. Scientists suggest that cats actually domesticated themselves, but still have a place in the natural environment (Alley Cats).

All animals able to be domesticated had to meet six criteria according to evolutionary biologists:

1. Flexible diet
2. Reasonably fast growth rate
3. Ability to breed in captivity
4. Pleasant disposition
5. Temperament that makes it unlikely to panic
6. Modifiable social hierarchy

Because of this criteria, not all animal species have been able to be domesticated by humans. Some species are too aggressive, such as zebras. Others have very specific diets that are not economically/financially beneficial to take on, such as pandas and koalas. Driscoll et al. states that commonly, mammals that have been domesticated undergo physical and physiological changes that differ greatly from that of their wild ancestors such as being dwarfs or giants, having piebald coat color, wavy or curly hair, fewer vertebrae, shorter or rolled tails, floppy ears, or other manifestations of the retention of juvenile features into sexual maturity, also known as neoteny. In regards to behavior, they go on to state that, "Domestication is not a single trait but a suite of traits, comprising elements affecting mood, emotion, agnostic and affiliative behavior, and social

communication that...modified in some way.... Domestication is permanent genetic modification of a bred lineage that leads to, among other things, a heritable predisposition toward human association” (Driscoll et al., 2009).

As a result of this genetic predisposition towards humans, and the outward need to rely on humans for survival, domestication has shifted over the years and while animals are still kept for social, agricultural, and economic gain to fit societies needs, they have also become a comfort. Some creatures we keep around solely for their companionship and loyalty. In the 1980s, awareness of the human-animal bond sparked a large study on the roles animals play in our lives, showing that pets provide significant benefits to the emotional, physical, and social well being of humans. With the outpour of billions of dollars that animal-lovers are willing to spend on animals each year, it comes as a surprise that animal cruelty and neglect is still rising at an alarming rate. With the paradoxical treatment of companion animals, it brings the topic of animal rights and laws into question and the call for reform and action is still unwavering (Case 2008).

Different states and the different counties within each state all hold different laws regarding the care and treatment of animals, especially those like feral cats. According to Google, “feral” is defined as “in a wild or natural state; especially after escape from captivity or domestication.” The nationwide law in regards to animal cruelty is this: “A person commits cruelty to animals if he or she intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly ill treats, overloads, beats, abandons, or abuses an animal” (PA Statutes). For the state of Pennsylvania, however, there are no distinct laws about the treatment of unowned cats. There has been much debate on online forums as to whether or not feral cats can be shot if they are on private property, and the ability to differentiate a feral cat from a



domesticated one. Because of the gray area that feral cats fall into under the law and no codes that are clearly upheld or enforced, it falls into the communities' hands to reach out to the state game commission, local animal control, and county officials to give clear order on what is and isn't prohibited for the humane treatment of these creatures. For those that are animal lovers, it can sometimes be disheartening to try to help local strays because of costs, and possible legal trouble that they could fall into if they get caught. The best thing to do in this scenario is to work with local shelters and organizations that have all the appropriate licensing to do things such as trap-neuter-release (TNR) or catching animals deemed to be in poor living conditions to treat them and try to adopt them out (Bickel 2004).

With the information that has already been laid out and what will be provided in coming paragraphs, it will be argued why communities, especially that of California, PA, need to come together to control the overpopulation of feral/stray cats and also ways in which this can be accomplished. Many of the feral cats around the California campus are there as a result of being abandoned by their original owners without being spayed or neutered, and they then reproduce and the colony number skyrockets. Much of the hesitancy to help them is because of not only the costs, but also the uncertainty of legal trouble one could get in to. With more advocacy and involvement, legislations could be put into place to ease this confusion.

For example, in a Utah community there is legislation in place called Utah's Community Cat Act that was adopted in 2011. It protects citizens that attempt to give care to "community cats", or cats that are feral or free-roaming without any kind of owner identification. This relieves those good Samaritans of any "custody", meaning that when

they return a cat to its original habitat they cannot be charged with abandonment. This also exempts community cats from needing to be licensed and prohibits feeding bans, supplying the caretakers with more legal protection to continue to feed and look after their local furry friends (Fresno Humane Animal Services). Having legislation like this in our community could help to encourage participation from a large number of citizens.

Another reason more communities should come together to humanely control feral cat populations is because of the connection and camaraderie that comes out of working together toward a common goal. In coming together for group activities such as trapping the cats, holding fundraisers to cover costs of vetting and food, building colony shelters/sanctuaries, and having adoption events, individuals can see that they have more in common with their neighbors other than just the area in which they live. Pride for the place that everyone calls home is gained. Whether it be for purely altruistic reasons or a bit of egoism, joining forces within the community to make it a better place and have a hand in controlling feral cat overpopulation by giving those cats better lives sounds like a great decision nonetheless. The number of organizations committed to helping stray and feral cats have better lives is an ever growing institution, with some of the more recognizable names being Alley Cat Allies, Best Friends Animal Society, and For the Love of Cats. Local to California in particular, one organization is known as Cali Cats. This increase in cat rescue organizations is because of an increase in interested members of a community wanting to give back and volunteer/work for a good cause. It is scientifically proven that spending time with animals is good for one's emotional, physical, and mental health (Robinson and Segal, 2020). By working with an organization to care for local feral cats, not only will one be solving a problem affecting

the lives of everyone in the community, but they'd also be helping improve their own overall health. Also, people are able to expand their social circle and gain professional and life experiences through these connections.

The final claim for why local communities need to better address feral cats is because of the paramount concern of overpopulation. As is true with any species that is overpopulated, the ecological balance is thrown off by having too many cats and not enough food resources. Visitors walking through CalU's campus might notice there are few if any squirrels roaming about. It's not because the squirrels chose not to live here, it's a result of the feral cats hunting and killing them. Many bird and small mammal populations are suffering at the hands of the booming cat population. A study on cat predation conducted by the Smithsonian's Migratory Bird Center and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Center stated that the death rate of small mammals by felines is 6.3-22.3 billion annually. Also, 2.4 billion birds are killed in the US each year as a result of feral and outdoor cats (Frantz, 2017). From a study abstract of a 2013 edition of *Nature Communications*, the researchers claimed "Our findings suggest that free-ranging cats cause substantially greater wildlife mortality than previously thought... single greatest source of anthropogenic mortality for U.S. birds and mammals. Scientifically sound conservation and policy intervention is needed to reduce this impact" (Frantz, 2017). By intervening to reduce the cat population, ecological balance can be restored and other species can begin to thrive again.

One way to accomplish this is by a well-managed trap-neuter-release program (TNR). TNR is a humane, non-lethal alternative to the trap-and-kill method of controlling cat populations. It is a management technique in which homeless and/or free-roaming

community cats are humanely trapped, evaluated and sterilized by a veterinarian, vaccinated, and released back to their original habitat (Fresno). A three decade long study was conducted on a college campus in Florida and results showed that the campus community cat population declined by a total of 85% from 1996-2019. This success rate is not completely as a result of TNR alone, however. Volunteers also coordinated adoptions of a large number of the cats, even those deemed feral. Great effort and dedication was needed in order to socialize cats in a foster care setting. Those that were deemed adoptable were then placed in loving homes (Hanneken, 2020). TNR programs are only effective when other measures are used along side it, such as adoption, prompt sterilization, and careful feeding station placement in an attempt to avoid newly abandoned cats from appearing. Another possible program would be to trap and vet the animals and build a community cat sanctuary. This would give the animals shelter while also being able to roam outside in a safe, fenced in area. This would require more labor, upkeep, and money, but some believe that this is a more effective method than simply trap, neuter, and release back to the original environment. As stated from a study advocating for cat rehabilitation and community-made sanctuaries, "... much to the benefit of cat welfare, wildlife protection, and public health.... 85% were eventually adopted out. The 15% who do not become socialized and adoptable were given permanent sanctuary" (Fox, 2020).

Also, by trapping and sterilizing the cats, there would be a decrease in howling, spraying, mounting, fighting, biting, aggressive behavior, and the urge to roam. Whether it be house pets or feral, the behavior of these animals would improve simply by getting sterilizing them (Paw Works, 2019). By doing this, nuisance complaints would go down

and there would be less male fighting over territory and mates, and less females having to go through the stress of child rearing each mating season. Not to mention, many of those born in each litter will not survive past infancy due to illness or harsh living conditions. Another concern of cat overpopulation that can be ameliorated with more community involvement is overcrowding of animal shelters and preventable euthanasia. In the US, every 13 seconds a healthy and adoptable dog or cat is euthanized in a shelter (Paw Works, 2019). There are more stray animals than there are beds in a shelter, so millions of cats each year have to be euthanized in an attempt to make room for more, regardless of health, age, or sociability. In a California state area in 2016, it was estimated that more than \$2.5 million would be spent by taxpayers to fund animal services or to trap and “remove” stray/feral animals (Paw Works 2019). While some may argue that TNR is more costly than trap and euthanasia, taxpayers are still giving their money to these programs. Wouldn't it be better to fund the more humane option, knowing that it is more suited to actually stop the issue over time, than just simply slapping a bandaid on it with no real improvement? TNR reduces animal shelter admissions and in turn reduces operation costs, more space is available for the adoptable animals, and the public health also benefits with the decrease in unvaccinated cats that could spread diseases to other animals or people (Fresno Humane Animal Services). By controlling the feline population through vetting, spaying, and neutering, other species will begin to thrive again, reproduction will be lowered and less kittens will perish, more space will be available in animal shelters, less money will be spent by taxpayers, cruel euthanasia will decrease, and nuisance complaints will decrease with less animals getting sick and unwanted behaviors subsiding post-sterilization.

There is no one “cure all, fix all”. Taking on a responsibility like this is hard work and time consuming, but through what has been outlined in this essay, the benefits appear to outweigh the costs. Communities should come together to control the current numbers of the feline population and advocate for their humane treatment. Better laws protecting feral cats need to be established, neighbors can come together and build strong relationships while improving the area in which they live, and lastly overpopulation is a serious issue with many branching consequences such as preventable euthanasia and ecological upsets to other species are a small list of reasons more people should get involved in these efforts. Much of the feral cats’ suffering is a result of human negligence and ignorance throughout time, so it falls on us to correct the mistake of the wrongdoings we’ve caused to animals we chose to domesticate and consider our companions. If more people spoke up and educated others, not only would the lives of the cats be improved, but also those of the ones who gave them a better chance.

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