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Tooth and Claw

Front Page

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Kill Kitty? Question Has the Fur Flying In Critter Crowd

As Cats Overrun the Nation,
Their Friends Must Defend
Against Fans of Feline Prey

Bird Lovers, Trappers Unite
By James P. Sterba



OLD BRIDGE, N.J. - Skunk work is a breeze for Frank Spiecker. Removing chimney raccoons, no sweat. When he turns up in his Harbor Wildlife Control pickup to trap a wild animal, he often receives a hero's welcome. Many residents of this leafy suburb are newcomers from cities, and they are terrified of the wild animals that live among them.

But when property managers, fearing health complaints or lawsuits, hire Mr. Spiecker to trap and remove stray cats, it's a different story. Cat jobs have gotten him screamed at, threatened and jostled. His truck has been jumped on and pounded, his traps run over, and his trapped cats freed.

"The screamers I can handle," he says. "It's the quiet ones you have to watch."

Mr. Spiecker is a mercenary on the front lines of the cat wars. To cat lovers, he abets feline mass murder, since most of the cats he traps end up dead. To many others, cats are the murderers, wreaking environmental havoc by killing billions of animals, birds and other wildlife every year. Fights between cat people (who often feed birds) and bird people (who often have cats) have sputtered for decades. But as the cat population has exploded - to well more than 100 million by most estimates - the conflict is rearranging the landscape of environmental politics.

How serious the problem is and what should be done about it are questions that have split veterinarians and wildlife biologist, divided animal-protection groups into rival camps, and united such strange bedfellows as bird-watchers and bird-shooters.

In one revealing battle, The Humane Society of the United States and The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1998 funded a signature drive in California for a state ballot initiative to ban leg-hold and other traps as cruel, and promoting it with gruesome TV ads.

As soon as it passed, The National Audubon Society sued in federal court in San Francisco to block enforcement of the ban, claiming that the law didn't apply to federal lands and that trapping feral cats, foxes and other predators is an important tool in saving endangered and migratory birds. The National Trappers Association joined the suit.

In his ruling in favor of Audubon, Federal District Judge Charles Legge wrote: "Most such litigation pits environmentalists against industry or government. Here we have an unusual alignment of birds versus mammals. That is, two competing groups of environmentalists are in court to protect their respective wildlife constituents against one another."

The Humane Society, a national animal-welfare and -

rights group unaffiliated with state and local Humane Societies, appealed. Late last month, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco upheld the lower court, saying that saving endangered species trumps the trapping ban. Wayne Pacelle, a senior vice president of the losing Humane Society, said: "We're disappointed that the Audubon Society essentially aligned themselves with commercial fur trappers and duck hunters."

Behind the shifting alliances are big changes in where people and animals live in America. A century ago, most cats lived in towns and cities separated from wildlife habitat by huge belts of cleared farmland. Farmers kept cats as mousers. The cats also preyed on other animals and birds around the farm. But their overall rural numbers were small.

Today, many farms are gone. The eastern third of the U.S. is home to the largest natural reforestation success story on the planet. Between splotches of big cities, trees, bushes and meadows have reclaimed abandoned farmland across hundreds of millions of acres, recreating a lush habitat for wildlife. At the same time, suburban sprawl has pushed relentlessly deeper into that habitat. That's where the majority of Americans -- and their cats -- now live.

To let cats roam freely in this prey-rich environment is criminal, bird people say. They say cats aren't native; they're an introduced species, like kudzu vine.

"Like West Nile virus," says Linda Winter, who runs the five-year-old "Cats Indoors!" campaign for the American Bird Conservancy, a bird-protection group in Washington. Keeping cats from roaming freely outdoors saves cats from passing cars, disease and predators, and saves wildlife from cats, she says.



FEEDING STRAYS ATTRACTS OTHER WILDLIFE

While the Humane Society supports the initiative, Washington-based Alley Cat Allies, a vociferous defender of stray

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cats, denounces "Cats Indoors" as "a new environmental witch hunt."

For millennia, the cat wasn't a warm fuzzy pet. As an elegantly efficient predator, it was pressed into service to patrol granaries and ships for rodents. Cats evolved only slowly as housepets until the 1960s, when odor-absorbent clay Kitty Litter became widely available, eliminating the cat's biggest drawback as a pet: its concentrated, foul-smelling urine.

Today, the number of pet cats in the U.S. is somewhere around 73 million, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. That number doesn't include feral cats -- strays that live on handouts, garbage and hunting. "Feral cat numbers are pure guesses," says Martha Armstrong, vice president for companion animals at the Humane Society. "There could be 30 million ferals, or 150 million."

If the high figure is anywhere close to the actual number, the total U.S. cat population exceeds the combined populations of cattle (99 million), pigs (61 million) and sheep (eight million). By contrast, the estimated U.S. population of white-tail deer, another controversial species, is 33 million.

The numbers are one reason many environmentalists are returning to a concept associated with the earliest days of the wildlife conservation movement: triage, or controlling one animal to protect another.

The conservation movement arose in the late 19th century in response to the ravages of commercial hunting for food and fashion. Conservationists lobbied successfully to outlaw hunting of threatened species and then nurtured them back by restocking deer, wild turkeys and other creatures. They then managed the species by setting bounties on their predators and, eventually, establishing seasons and catch-limits for hunters and trappers.

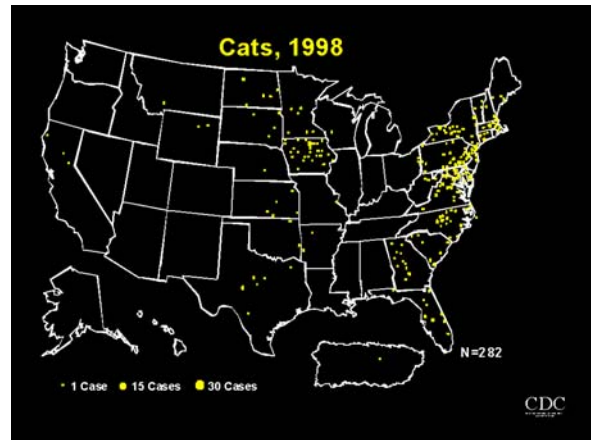
In the 1960s, many modern environmentalists began to view any human interference in nature as negative. Some sided with animal-rights groups to condemn any killing of animals for sport or economic gain or to manage wildlife populations. In recent years, they got trapping banned in several states, thwarted efforts by some local governments to kill white-tail deer and Canada geese, and stopped medical and other research using animals for experiments. They also attacked animal shelters as death rows for pets. Privately run shelters began advertising themselves as "no-kill," promising to find a new home for every animal taken in. (They often turn away unadoptable animals, which are then abandoned or taken to municipal shelters and killed.)

Now, in wildlife refuges and in the urban and suburban settings where man and animal directly confront each other with increasing frequency, killing is making a comeback. "We've shifted more and more to supporting hunting and trapping as tools of wildlife management," says Frank Gill, an Audubon senior vice president.

That thinking has figured largely in a series of setbacks for cat defenders. This year, municipal and county governments across the nation, responding to cat complaints, have adopted cat control or anti-cat-feeding laws, stiffened the ones they had and promised to begin enforcing long-ignored regulations.

In June, for example, the Akron, Ohio, City Council passed a law requiring that all cats be licensed, vaccinated

against rabies and not allowed to run loose. By late August, 575 stray cats had been picked up and more than 400 of them euthanized. A local cat-defense group then filed a lawsuit in Summit County, Ohio, alleging that the law is inhumane. The case is pending.



Feline (Domestic Cat) Rabies Cases

The same month that Akron passed its law, scientists at the University of California at Davis said runoff tainted with cat feces may be killing the state's endangered sea otters. Nearly half of 223 live and dead otters tested were found to be infected with a parasite called *Toxoplasma gondii*. Cats are the only known source of the parasite.

In January, the U.S. Navy outlawed feral-cat colonies from all of its installations. Military bases become dumping grounds for pets when personnel are transferred. Feral cats also thrive on college campuses, where departing students abandon their pets, and around factories, restaurants, hospitals and other institutions where people feed them.

In its announcement, the Navy said two programs it used to manage the colonies don't work and harm wildlife. For more than a decade, so-called trap-neuter-release, or TNR, programs and trap-test-vaccinate-alter-release programs were embraced as an alternative to killing strays. The idea is that once the cats are castrated and released, they gradually die out because they can't reproduce. Volunteers feed and monitor the colonies, keeping out new strays. TNR advocates say cats in the colonies also defend their territory themselves against intruding newcomers.

Wildlife biologists call TNR a pipe dream that allows feral cats, neutered or not, to kill more wildlife. Bird people cite a new 13-month study of two Miami colonies by Dan Castillo, a graduate student, who found that the colonies encourage people to illegally dump their unwanted cats, which have kittens before they can be trapped and castrated.

Trapping pros such as Mr. Spiecker say another obvious flaw in TNR is that you can trap feral cats once and give them a rabies shot, but that it's nearly impossible to trap them a year later to give them a necessary booster. They learn quickly to avoid traps.

Alley Cat Allies, a TNR promoter, called the Navy decision a "death sentence" for feral cats. The group also announced that it would switch the focus of its energy from pro-

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moting TNR among cat lovers to fighting the backlash against them.

The Humane Society says that one fertile female and her offspring can produce 420,000 cats in seven years. As strays, they lead short, brutal lives. Sterilization rates for pet cats jumped dramatically, to 80% in 1990 from 10% in 1970, says Peter Marsh, a Concord, N.H., lawyer who founded Solutions to Overpopulation of Pets to promote neutering and reduce euthanasia in shelters. But feral reproduction more than makes up for nonbreeding pets.

To underscore the damage these cats do, bird lovers often cite Stanley Temple, a wildlife ecologist at the University of Wisconsin. His study team reported in the late 1980s that densities of free-range cats in some parts of rural Wisconsin outnumbered all midsize native predators -- foxes, raccoons, skunks and the like -- combined. The report said a "good guess" was that these cats killed from eight million to 217 million birds annually. It added that "most reasonable estimates indicate" that 39 million birds are killed by cats in the state. Citing other studies, the report went on:

"Nationwide, rural cats probably kill over a billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of birds each year. Urban and suburban cats add to this toll. Some of these kills are house mice, rats and other species considered pests, but many are native songbirds and mammals whose populations are already stressed by other factors, such as habitat destruction and pesticide pollution." It added: "World-wide, cats may have been involved in the extinction of more bird species than any other cause, except habitat destruction."

Dr. Temple says he was bombarded with hate mail.

Since then, bird people have seen cause to hope that nature is starting to deal with cat overpopulation in its own way. Coyotes and fishers, two predators of cats, are making dramatic comebacks. "Coyotes here have adapted to feeding on cats in urban areas," says Ron Jurek, a California Fish and Game Department wildlife biologist.

Fishers, which look like large weasels, have the advantage of being able to follow cats up trees. Just having these predators around keeps cats closer to home, says Roland Kays, curator for mammals at the New York State Museum in Albany who studies cats in the Albany Pine Bush preserve.

But they aren't likely to put people such as Mr. Spiecker out of business anytime soon. When he was growing up in Old Bridge and learning to trap, this part of New Jersey was still farms and small towns. Now 35, he drives his truck down roads lined with fast-food joints, auto-parts outlets, malls, gas stations and the other fixtures of suburban sprawl.

To point out change, he pulls into a large apartment complex on a hill and drives to the back-fence Dumpsters. Beyond them, where farmers used to till fields, forest stretches as far as the eye can see -- a habitat full of the animals and cats that fuel his business. About 40% is cat trapping.

When a woman said her small dog was attacked by a stray cat at the 1,200-unit Glenwood Apartments two years ago, Mr. Spiecker was hired to trap strays for \$50 apiece. In the year ending September last year, he trapped 370 cats and nearly 600 raccoons, opossums and skunks. He relocated the wild animals to a state refuge and delivered the cats to the

Old Bridge Township Animal Shelter.

Nearly half the 65,880 cats brought to New Jersey animal shelters last year were euthanized, according to the state health department. About 100 of the cats Mr. Spiecker brought to the Old Bridge shelter found homes, thanks to Barbara Lee Brucker, who has worked there for 21 years. The additional 270 were judged too wild or sick to keep and given lethal injections. Their carcasses were frozen.

"This is considered to be a no-kill shelter," Ms. Brucker says with a raised eyebrow. "Trap, neuter, release? We did it by the book for four years and it just didn't work." Dumped cats and new strays kept turning up.

When Ms. Brucker's freezer is full of dead animals, she calls the Abbey Glen Pet Cemetery in Morris County. They send a truck and incinerate the carcasses for 35 cents a pound.

