

**I**t wasn't the shot heard around the world—but it didn't go unnoticed.

The victim, a feral tabby named Mama Cat, lived under the San Luis Pass Bridge in Galveston, Texas, where she was fed by an elderly toll worker. In November 2006, Mama Cat took a .22 hollow point bullet to the spine and, according to police testimony, suffered more than 30 minutes before dying. The triggerman, local birding guide James Stevenson, was unrepentant. He claimed the cat was a threat to endangered piper plovers nesting on the nearby dunes, and killing her was a public service.

Debates on the Galveston killing started simmering on the Internet, with cat and bird enthusiasts quick to weigh in. And when Stevenson was indicted on animal cruelty charges five months later, the national press picked up the story, depicting cats and birds and the people who defend them at deadly odds with no middle ground in sight.

Judging from the more colorful commentary from both sides, it wasn't hard to believe. As the trial date neared, birding blogs flew "Free Jim Stevenson" banners on their home pages and posted comments describing cats as "mini-Hitlers," "a scourge on our landscape," and "manmade killing machines." Pet lovers fired back with reactions to the "evil Galveston bird lover" and—in response to reports that Stevenson had killed many felines wandering through his yard—"serial cat killer."

None of this happened in a vacuum. The Galveston incident reflected just one highly publicized skirmish in a decades-long fight between conservationists and cat advocates. When the case ended in a mistrial in November 2007, the focus shifted

to other battlegrounds, including a popular seaside resort in New Jersey, a tiny town in Iowa, and an island off California's southern coast. And again, the situation was presented as an either/or question: Do we save the cats or the birds?

To people like Stevenson, the tradeoff is clear. "I had to choose who dies," he told *The Wall Street Journal*. But there are compassionate people who aren't comfortable making such choices. And they're working to prove that we don't need to.

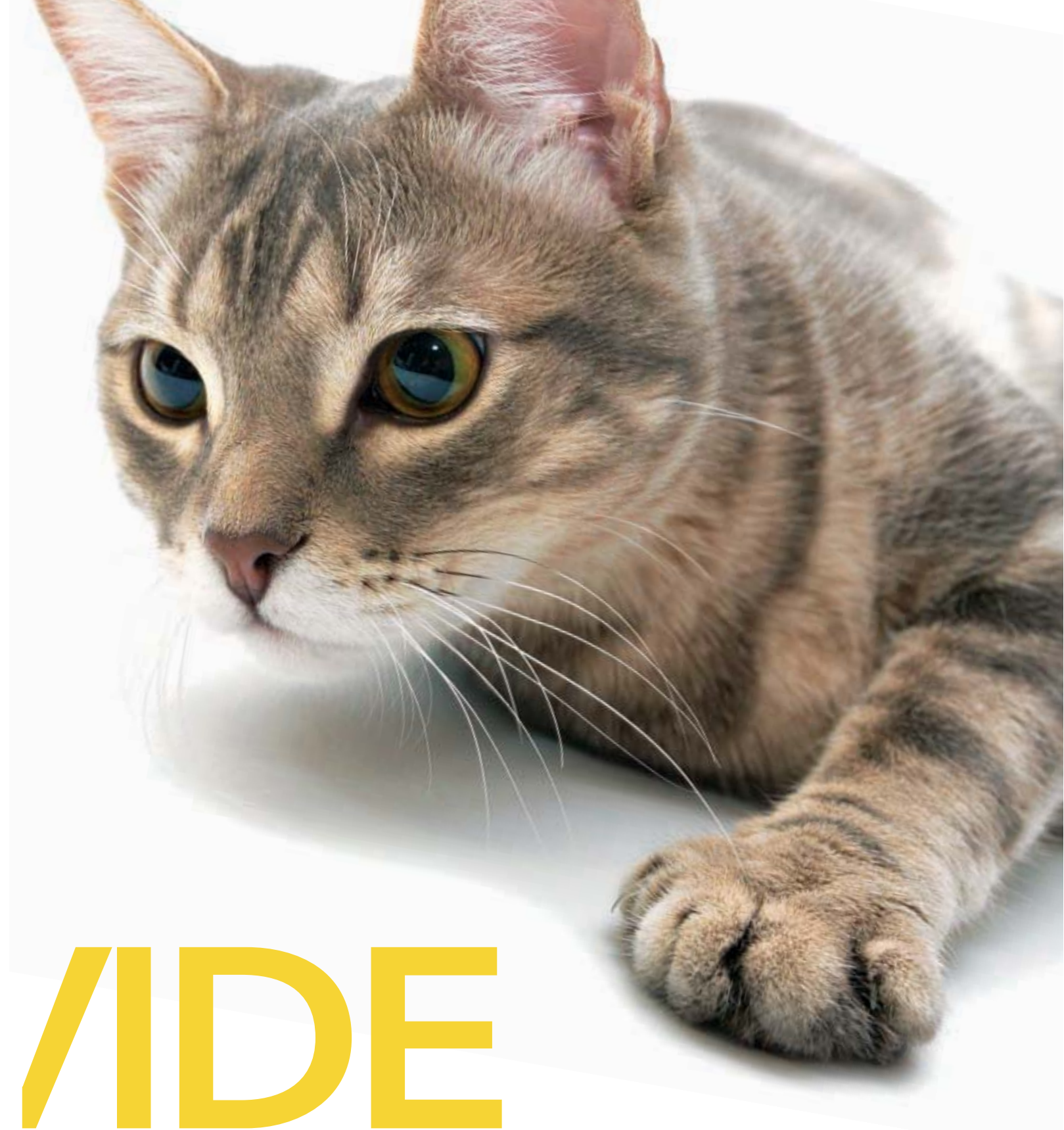
#### HOW WE GOT HERE

In the 1970s, the nation's shelters were euthanizing 15 to 20 million dogs and cats a year—most of them healthy, adoptable animals. Spay/neuter clinics were scarce, animal control received minimal funding, and since local governments often wouldn't pay for cat management, many municipal shelters accepted only dogs. In this environment, free-roaming cats—particularly ferals, who aren't socialized to people and are rarely adoptable—were a low priority. Local and state agencies sometimes killed or trapped and removed groups of ferals in response to complaints, but for the most part, these wild counterparts to one of the nation's most popular pets were simply ignored.

Feral cats emerged from the shadows in the mid-1980s with a grassroots movement to control their numbers non-lethally. The trap-neuter-return method, or "TNR," involves trapping cats for sterilization, vaccinating them for rabies, removing the tip of one ear so the cats are recognized as members of a managed colony, and returning them to their territories for long-term oversight by local caretakers. Kittens and tame adults

# Prowling THE DIN





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After years of debate about the place of feral cats in our society, bird lovers and feline advocates are making peace for the sake of the animals

by JULIE FALCONER





The left ear tip identifies this cat as a member of a managed colony.

are typically removed and placed for adoption, and cat colonies gradually diminish as the animals age and die off.

It's an innovative solution to a dilemma that continues to this day. Though euthanasia rates have steadily declined since the 1970s, even socialized lap cats often face slim chances for adoption. Meanwhile, tens of millions of street cats occupy the fringes of urban, suburban, and rural areas, subsisting on handouts or scavenging around dumpsters. They and their offspring often end up at shelters, adding more lives to an already crowded lottery for too few homes.

TNR's pioneers recognized that cat overpopulation wouldn't be solved without addressing the needs of ferals. They argued that removing the cats based on nuisance complaints created a vacuum for more cats to move into the territory and begin the breeding cycle anew. And they questioned the ethics of expecting shelters—originally established as havens for homeless pets—to euthanize an endless stream of healthy but untame animals.

But these early advocates received little praise for their efforts. The most heated criticism initially came from animal welfareists who worried that the presence of managed cat colonies would encourage people to abandon pets at colony sites. And TNR seemed to sanction life on the streets at a time when shelters were trying to change the cultural mindset, encouraging people to view dogs and cats as cherished family members—not objects to be chained in backyards or allowed to roam at will.

“We considered it condoned abandon-

ment,” says John Snyder, vice president of The HSUS's Companion Animals section, referring to the organization's early opposition to TNR. “It was hard to reconcile our ideal of the safe indoor home with the TNR model, which lets the cats live outside and take their chances.”

But just five years after the Feral Cat Coalition of San Diego launched an aggressive TNR program in 1992, a local animal control agency reported a nearly 50-percent decrease in the number of cats impounded and euthanized. Other projects across the country began to show similarly impressive results, while veterinarians Margaret Slater and Julie Levy wrote convincingly about the benefits of nonlethal feral cat management. It became obvious that TNR was helping to combat cat overpopulation, says Snyder.

At the time, The HSUS was a microcosm of the larger debate. Wildlife staff were concerned about protecting all wild species, not just the rare and endangered ones, while pet experts were thinking of the cats. “People were literally in tears over this issue,” says Stephanie Shain, director of outreach for The HSUS's Companion Animals section. “What kept us pushing forward together was the fact that we all wanted to find a way to protect cats and wild animals, understanding that there are generally no simple answers to complex issues like this.”

Shain, a longtime supporter of TNR, helped craft the organization's new policy. “I was thrilled to see the change,” she says.

“It was great to come to a place where we were very clearly pro-TNR and could put resources toward helping feral cats.”

But as TNR gained traction in the animal welfare movement, some conservation groups stepped up their offensive.

### A CONSERVATION DILEMMA

Last year, scientists announced that human-related changes to the global climate and ecosystems have ushered in a new geological era, the Anthropocene. The effects on wildlife are grim. Worldwide bird populations are in free fall, and the National Audubon Society has concluded that nearly one quarter of the 448 species of land birds who breed in North America may be slipping toward extinction.

Reports by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and other wildlife protection organizations agree that habitat loss and degradation are the primary causes of this decline. But the National Audubon Society, along with the American Bird Conservancy and the National Wildlife Federation, also identify free-roaming cats—including tame pets allowed to wander from home and feral cats who live outdoors—as a contributing factor. The American Bird Conservancy denounces managed cat colonies as a threat to the nation's wildlife—“the wrong solution to a tragic problem”—and actively lobbies against TNR programs.

Most conservationists believe that fer-



Left to their own devices, feral cats are trapped in an endless cycle of breeding and scavenging for food.

als should be trapped and removed to protect wild animals from cats who may hunt them or compete with them for food. Meanwhile, TNR advocates argue that cats have been made scapegoats for a much larger problem caused by our own species.

“Arguing over cats versus birds trivializes the bigger issues,” says Becky Robinson, president of the national feral cat advocacy organization Alley Cat Allies. “It deflects attention from the critical issues that are truly affecting wild animals.”

Years of debate have whipped up so much animosity that some birding listservs have banned or limited posts on the “dreaded cat thread.” But more recently, new voices have paved the way to a fresh

perspective: that conservationists and feral cat advocates aren’t natural enemies but obvious allies.

“Is there such a thing as a cat-person or a bird-person?” asked a 2008 press release from the Audubon Society of Portland in Oregon. “It’s not about birds versus cats; it’s about protecting birds and cats.”

It was an unusual statement from a wildlife organization, but conservation director Bob Sallinger defies some of the stereotypes animal advocates have about conservationists. For one, he doesn’t believe in killing animals on behalf of other animals—something many environmentalists support when they believe a species is threatened. “Where does it end?” asks



Sallinger. “I struggle with that.”

And despite the years he spent overseeing a wildlife rehabilitation hospital that receives a steady flow of the victims of

## Mapping a Plan for Success

New Jersey activists craft innovative pilot program to help feral cats and wildlife

**T**hough he’d been a veterinarian for 30 years, Gordon Stull knew little about TNR until he was asked to head the governor’s animal welfare task force in New Jersey.

“That was when I understood the significance of feral cats, what they represented in terms of animal welfare and the economics of animal control, and how important it was to have a TNR program,” he says. Following a career in private practice, Stull was looking for a way to help large numbers of animals during retirement. In 2004, he founded the Burlington County Feral Cat Initiative (BCCI) with a goal of decreasing the feral population through aggressive spay/neuter programs in the county’s 40 townships.

The first year, BCCI successfully launched TNR programs in four townships. But during negotiations with the town of Tabernacle, “the proverbial excrement hit the fan,” Stull says, in the form of opposition from state and national wildlife organizations.

“My first reaction was to fight the opposition, but then I realized that we might win a battle but we’d lose the war unless we figured out a way to resolve this issue,” he says.

He contacted Bryan Kortis of Neighborhood Cats, who arranged a meeting with Eric Stiles, vice president of conservation and stewardship for the New Jersey Audubon Society. Stull and Stiles together searched for a middle ground.

“Initially, we were stuck in a world of ‘our science is better than your science,’” Stull says, “so we agreed to put aside all the science and just sit down and discuss the issues.”

From those first steps, the partnership evolved

into the New Jersey Feral Cat & Wildlife Coalition, composed of state health officials; conservation groups; and animal protection organizations, including The HSUS, which provided a \$10,000 grant that enabled Stull to hire BCCI’s first employee.

Simply talking through the issues broke much of the initial resistance. For starters, many stakeholders didn’t understand the TNR model. “They thought the cats were just being released anywhere in the wild, not returned to their caretakers where they were already living,” Stull says.

The “bird people” and the “cat people” gradually began to trust each other. “We became one another’s best advocates,” says Nancy Peterson, feral cat program manager for The HSUS. “The transformation and excitement were palpable.”

Over the next three years, coalition participants designed a protocol that balances the need to reduce feral cat populations with the need to protect rare wildlife species. The New Jersey Division of Fish and

Wildlife used a computerized map to allow easy identification of wildlife-sensitive areas. If feral colonies are within a quarter mile of cat-vulnerable species, the groups discuss the situation and the best way of handling it, which could be TNR, relocation of the cats, or a combination of the two.

Stull is hopeful that this pilot program will serve as a model for feral cat and wildlife organizations across the nation. “If we can develop and maintain trusting relationships, these partnerships will go forward and succeed,” he says. “No one should have to fight this battle again.”



## Californians forge pioneering partnership of cat lovers, bird advocates, and city officials

**Four years ago**, Cimeron Morrissey noticed something unusual on the boulders separating a pedestrian path from the San Francisco Bay: “The rocks suddenly became alive with kittens,” she recalls.

The freelance writer had seen groups of cats sunning themselves during her previous kiteboarding jaunts. But it wasn’t until she saw the baby explosion that she realized the extent of the problem.

Living in scattered groups along a 4-mile stretch of the Bay Trail



Cimeron Morrissey

south of the city, the cats had subsisted for years on food provided by about a dozen people. Their population had grown to about 180 and had caught the attention of the local Audubon Society, which raised concerns about effects on endangered California clapper rails who lived near

the trail and the shorebirds who used it as a resting spot.

Though she had never heard the term “feral cat,” Morrissey ended up making TNR history when she spearheaded a coalition of feline rescuers, wildlife advocates, and Foster City officials. In the process, her lack of animal rescue experience worked to her advantage; without knowledge of past controversies, she saw no reason why the relationship should be adversarial. At city council meetings, she set herself apart from the cat advocates who were openly hostile to the birding crowd and made it clear that she wanted a solution that would help all animals.

Morrissey found a willing ally in Robin Winslow Smith, conservation committee chair of the Sequoia Audubon Society. Smith understood the arguments for TNR and didn’t take the bait of local reporters, who were clearly hoping for a fight between the cat and bird defenders.

“We got together and said we’re not going to buy into that—we’re going to work together and do what we can to improve things for the cats and the birds,” Smith says.

Project Bay Cat—a partnership of the Homeless Cat

Network, the Sequoia Audubon Society, and the Foster City government—was launched a few months later.

Audubon members first identified 10 zones where felines wouldn’t be a threat to birds, and volunteers set up feeding stations to gradually move cats away from wildlife-sensitive areas. By sterilizing the ferals and removing tame cats for adoption, Project Bay Cat has decreased the trail’s feline population by 44 percent in less than four years. Meanwhile, bird populations along the trail are thriving.

Coalition members have maintained positive relationships, largely because Morrissey has never taken her partners’ support for granted. She coordinates feeding schedules so wild animals aren’t noshing on kitty kibble and organizes trash pickup days to keep debris off the trail. And when a black Persian proved his strong hunting ability by killing several rats, Morrissey found him a home where his mousing skills were wanted. “Relocation isn’t practicable on a large scale,” she says, “but it can be done judiciously.”

Morrissey credits Project Bay Cat’s success to its holistic approach, which includes educating the public about homeless cat issues to prevent animal abandonment and encouraging spaying and neutering of owned pets. “We owe it to all creatures to try to find humane solutions for all animals,” she says, “including the birds.”



house cat attacks, he doesn’t hold a grudge against cats either. Almost a third of bird species in Oregon are in serious trouble, Sallinger says, but “even if we solve the cat problem tomorrow, it’s not going to stop bird populations from declining. It would just be removing one pressure—and none of [the pressures] are going to be solved overnight.”

### FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND

Sallinger’s long-term approach inspired a partnership with the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon, which responded positively to his request in 2007 to sign a letter encouraging people to keep their pet cats indoors. Last February, the two organizations launched the “It’s Good for Cats and It’s Good for Wildlife” public education campaign to fur-

ther promote the benefits of the indoor life. “The point isn’t targeting ferals as something negative in the environment, but helping to prevent future ferals,” says the cat coalition’s executive director, Karen Kraus.

Key to such collaborations is a willingness to set aside grudges, refrain from superficial squabbling, and acknowledge the validity of others’ concerns, believes TNR



advocate Bryan Kortis. The cofounder of Neighborhood Cats in New York City, Kortis recognizes missteps on both sides. Conservationists have been guilty of throwing around “fake science” that exaggerates feline predation on wildlife, he says, while TNR advocates have often refused to acknowledge that cats may significantly impact some bird populations. “Even if it’s 10th on the list, there is still some impact from cat predation,” says Kortis, who is also the author of a trap-neuter-return manual published by The HSUS in 2007. “Let’s not avoid the issue, but let’s not rely on studies that don’t apply either.”

Many opponents assert that TNR creates and enables feral cat colonies. But, as Kortis points out, the cats are already there, often fed by people who don’t even realize that trapping and spaying is an option. “We’re trying to fix the problem,” he says.

At the same time, cat advocates should recognize that TNR may not be appropriate in certain circumstances, such as in the middle of a sensitive bird sanctuary where attrition over time is too slow. Though relocating feral cats is difficult, it should be considered in these rare situations. Those who insist that cats stay in an area where they could have a genuine impact on a threatened species are simply exacerbating “the ‘no TNR anywhere’ sentiment that cripples the larger effort,” Kortis says.

“It’s not about birds versus cats; it’s about protecting birds and cats.”

— AUDUBON SOCIETY OF PORTLAND



ity to protect native species that, because of past actions by humans, may otherwise disappear. But that doesn’t absolve us from a moral responsibility for finding humane methods to resolve conflict.

We can’t accept our cell phone towers, seaside homes, superhighways, skyscrapers, and suburban sprawl, and still feel justified killing animals who don’t jibe with our opinion of what the natural world should look like. Like many wild species, feral cats

challenge us to combine our best methods for protecting all animals—while acknowledging the limits of our control over ecological systems.

Ironically, the polarizing Galveston cat killing carries a constructive message for cat and bird advocates. Two days after the trial began, Stevenson’s attorney, Ted Nelson, described the difficulty of selecting a jury. “Six or seven people got struck because they thought it was the biggest waste of their time,” Nelson told ABCNews.com. “They couldn’t believe they got called down to court to talk about a bird and a cat.”

It’s a reality that both sides should keep in mind. The enemies of cat defenders and bird protectors aren’t each other, but the portion of the public that considers these issues too trivial for serious consideration. People who care about animals—domestic, wild, or in-between—can’t afford to be divided. ■

## NO SPECIES IS AN ISLAND

Caught in a no-man’s land between wild animal and family pet, feral cats are clearly in a class of their own. But they’re just one of the many victims of humans’ belief that we can order nature to our liking, killing one species to save another.

In recent years, tax dollars have funded the slaughter of wolves for the sake of game species such as elk and moose; sea lions to protect salmon; raccoons on behalf of marsh rabbits; double-crested cormorants to preserve the walleye; and mute swans for native waterfowl.

People often feel a special responsibil-

## Feral Cat Advocacy at The HSUS

Launched in 2005, The HSUS’s feral cat program promotes community-based TNR efforts through advice to caretakers, community outreach, public policy work, and grants to organizations that help feral cats. The HSUS publishes two books on implementing effective TNR programs, a CD/DVD set on feral cat management, and an educational brochure on helping homeless cats.



On-site workshops and online courses through Humane Society University ([humanesociety.org/university](http://humanesociety.org/university)) educate caretakers and animal sheltering professionals on community TNR program models, colony care, and feral cat advocacy. For more information or to donate to our feral cat program fund, visit [humanesociety.org/feralcats](http://humanesociety.org/feralcats).

