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Mar 30, 2020 Outdoor Cats – It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

By Bryan Kortis, Esq.

As I sit here tapping out this essay, one thing on my mind is how best to respond to the latest proposal on cats being promoted here in Hawaii by the conservation community. Here in Hawaii, on the island of Kauai, conservationists are pushing the county government to launch a cat eradication campaign, using the threat of a major lawsuit if the county refuses. This “solution” has been proposed even though the only shelter on Kauai refuses to participate, there are other policy options that could be more effective, and the only successful cat eradication campaigns have occurred on uninhabited islands at costs ranging into the millions of dollars.

Meanwhile on Maui, wildlife advocates are taking a different tack, perhaps realizing there is little appetite for wholesale killing of outdoor cats. Instead, they are trying to frighten the local government by claiming cats are a significant public health risk which spread toxoplasmosis to residents, especially children. Put them in a sanctuary, they argue, if you do not want to kill them. But a well-managed sanctuary costs about \$1,000 per cat per year, and there may be tens of thousands of outdoor cats on the island. Also, significant populations of outdoor cats have lived on Maui for decades, but only 11 reported cases of toxoplasmosis in humans have been reported in the last ten years. The state's epidemiologist has stated toxoplasmosis is not a serious concern for most people. The conservationists also seek new ordinances on cat licensing, pet limits and feeding bans, laws that have been enacted repeatedly over the years in hundreds of

communities but have not been shown to result in fewer outdoor cats. Clearly, Hawaii has much more urgent and serious concerns to deal with right now as the new coronavirus spreads across the world.

As a result of these pressures, I will be dusting off the old playbook which has been deployed in these situations for the past 20 years. We will present evidence to policymakers on the [practical and feasible solutions](#) that exist for reducing cat numbers in populated areas. In truth, there is still only one approach that has worked: intensive spay/neuter. The conservationists will argue that there is no proof that trap-neuter-return (TNR) works, although there are numerous studies showing the contrary. They will argue it is only the adoption of trapped cats that has lowered numbers, and we will respond that there are no adoptions without the spay/neuter intervention and that sterilization is an essential component in reducing outdoor cat numbers, as multiple published studies now demonstrate. The wildlife biologists will show graphic photos of cats with dead birds in their mouths and long lists of zoonotic diseases that cats can carry. They will decry how unhealthy the poor felines are outside, as if they really care about the cats' welfare. We will then address the exaggerations and shift the discussion back to solutions. The wildlife biologists may even argue that PETA is against TNR, but we will then respond that the Humane Society of the United States and ASPCA are for it. On and on the debate will go.

In my experience, the wildlife side usually loses these fights because at the end of the day, whether you love cats or hate them, whether they are responsible for preying on native species or not, whether they are a public health risk or not, one still has to produce an effective intervention if one wants to lower their numbers. The lack of any successful example of a catch-and-eradicate approach (beyond those on small, uninhabited islands) is the conservationists' Achilles heel. They want the cats gone but have no feasible proposal to make it happen. They seem to believe it is just a matter of willpower and refusing to make any concessions. It is not. This is why the conservationists win the occasional battle but have long since lost the war in this country. [TNR](#) is now a common and well-entrenched practice in communities across the United States, and its reach grows daily. Meanwhile, the intake of cats into shelters declines.

It did not have to be this way. When I first dived into the cats versus birds debate, what struck me immediately was that both sides want the same thing: fewer cats on the landscape. The reasons differ, but the goal does not. Surely, I thought, if cat advocates and conservationists could better understand and trust each other, that common goal could be a bond tying the two communities together in a search for the most humane and effective ways to lower free-roaming cat populations. Instead of cats versus birds, it could be cats and birds.

My first collaborative effort took place in New Jersey. A TNR group in Burlington County, headed by a veterinarian, persuaded townships to adopt pro-TNR ordinances in exchange for his group coming in and fixing their outdoor cats. Wildlife agencies grew alarmed because of the presence of threatened species in the area. The issue escalated and the typical fight was about to begin. The head of the local TNR group asked for my advice and I suggested he talk about it over dinner with a representative of New Jersey Audubon Society. They met, quickly realized they shared a common goal, and agreed to try to find a solution that worked for everyone.

Over the next two years, regular meetings were held between local, state and national wildlife and animal welfare groups. It took time to dispel misconceptions on both sides and build trust, but eventually a collaborative effort took hold. It was understood the threat posed by cats to wildlife is very location-specific and that while TNR might be fine behind the supermarket, it might not be suitable for a forest habitat occupied by protected species vulnerable to cat attacks. Identifying those locations where cats are an actual threat was key, as was assessing what approaches were realistically possible to implement. Sometimes it might be better to do TNR in a sensitive area, with proper oversight by relevant wildlife agencies, rather than continuing to do nothing.

The collaboration reached the point where it was about to launch a statewide online database available to anyone working with cats. Users could plug in an address and identify whether they were operating in a wildlife sensitive area where consultation with the state's endangered species program was necessary. Unfortunately, some voices in the conservation community who had not participated in the trust-building talks took over. They tried to use a little-known state agency to declare "feral cats" an exotic species which could not legally be released into the wild. They lost, but the bitter fight caused the parties in the collaboration to pull back and the cooperation on outdoor cats and wildlife faded away.

Similar attempts at collaboration in which I have been involved have also failed. On Long Island, New York, talks were progressing well but then a new representative from one of the wildlife groups came in and started pushing hardline anti-TNR rhetoric, resulting in the loss of all progress. In Hawaii, animal welfare and wildlife agencies also met for some time and were near an understanding on outdoor cats and wildlife. However, the wildlife interests then expected the animal welfare groups to undertake trapping and euthanizing of cats in sensitive locations, which they refused to do. A subsequent attempt to form a state-level task force on cats and wildlife was shot down by the head of Hawaii's wildlife agency.

I believe the biggest obstacles to cooperation are currently the attempts by conservationists to produce a cat-free landscape in the immediate or near future without considering any form of trap-and-return program anywhere. The biggest losers, besides the cats who die needlessly, are the wildlife all parties would like to protect. By making this a zero-sum game with one winner and one loser, wildlife groups have abandoned their seat at the table – the table where guidelines on working in or near sensitive habitat would be developed, where research could be launched to improve outdoor cat control approaches, and where both sides could hash out how best to manage a particular problematic location. Instead, we fight on.