

International Programs for Feral Cats

Feral cats are under attack in almost every part of the world. The same myths that exist in one country about feral cats exist in other countries as well, with the possible exception of England. One and a half million feral cats live mostly harmoniously in England (most live in crowded London), without being considered a major health hazard to local humans. And TNR programs for feral cats have existed there since the 1950s. As part of our dedicated work to help cats, ACR will continue to bring communities from around the world together so we can humanely manage feral cat populations and reduce their suffering. For more information on any of our international programs, please visit our website.



Paul Bryan on Unsplash

A cat seen resting on a London sidewalk.

In truth there is no utopia for animals anywhere in the world. The goal of Alley Cat Rescue is to bring nonlethal control, specifically Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), to feral cats everywhere in the world. Feral cats are considered by many to be “introduced” or “alien pests.” Feral cats were introduced to most countries by humans hundreds of years ago, and killing them will not miraculously wipe them out, especially on continents. We should be ethically bound to treat all sentient beings with compassion,

and whenever proven, nonlethal methods are available, we should be morally bound to use these instead of resorting to killing.

When we make these statements, the anti-cat folks say, “What about all the birds and small mammals that cats prey on?” The answer to this is:

1. We are controlling and reducing the number of stray and outdoor cats through acceptable and effective programs. Killing does not work. In fact it is counterproductive and allows for unneutered cats to enter vacated territory, and the breeding to continue.
2. Cats prey mostly on rodents — they are rodent specialists — and they help society by keeping rodent populations in check.
3. Predation on rodents helps birds, as studies show that rats do far more damage to birds than cats do.
4. The birds preyed on by cats are mostly young, old, or sickly and would not survive to see the next breeding season.
5. Most feral and domestic cats live in urban areas and yet, according to the 2009 “State of the Birds” report, “114 native urban birds species show a steady, strong increase for the past 40 years.” This begs the question, if cat predation decimates bird populations, how are numbers of birds increasing in areas where the most outdoor cats congregate?
6. ACR asks all cat advocates to help birds and other wildlife by making simple changes to their lifestyles that

will protect the habitat of birds. Take steps towards creating bird-friendly gardens, not using pesticides and fertilizers, and eating lower on the food chain, as animal agriculture contributes substantially to habitat destruction, climate change, and pollution. This is the single most important thing any of us can do to help birds survive.

ACR Helps Cats in South Africa

The African wildcat (*Felis lybica*) is the ancestor of today's domestic cats. Unfortunately, like so many cat species (cheetah, leopard, tiger), the African wildcat (AWC) is in danger of extinction. Human encroachment is one reason for their decline. Land development forces AWCs to live on smaller tracts of land. Their habitats are fragmented, making migration from one tract of land to the next dangerous. Plus, habitat loss decreases the number of prey animals, making finding food more difficult. Besides the dangers imposed by humans, hybridization is a threat to the African wildcat. Local domestic cats (whether they are family pets, strays, or feral), breed with AWCs. This dilutes the species' gene pool, decreasing the number of pure wildcats. Currently, the African wildcat is considered endangered and is protected under CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) Appendix II. Unfortunately, this protection is limited (hunting is only regulated and/or prohibited in a few countries) and in South Africa, there is no legal protection for them. Farmers routinely kill African wildcats out of fear that they will kill farmed animals and livestock.

Adding to the problem, veterinarian clinics are sparse and locals do not have the transportation nor the money to take their cats to the vet. This means many cats are not sterilized, which increases the probability

of domestic cats breeding with the AWCs. ACR saw this first hand while visiting South Africa, when we spotted stray and feral cats in several of the cities on the outskirts of game reserves. The need to TNR stray outdoor cats is essential for both species of cats.

In 2007 ACR worked with a group in Sun City, South Africa, to provide TNR to feral cats living at the resort, which borders the Pilanesberg Game Reserve. Again, our efforts are to prevent the interbreeding of feral cats and African Wildcats.



Alley Cat Rescue

African wildcat in South Africa. This wild cat's numbers are in decline due to habitat loss and interbreeding with feral cats and strays. Alley Cat Rescue has a TNR project in South Africa.

Over a decade later, in 2018, we obtained the funds needed to revive our South African TNR program. We focused on free-roaming cats along the 200 mile border of Kruger National Park. In partnership with local TNR organizations, we have sterilized about 3,500 cats as of August of 2022.

In 2021, we expanded our work to include towns and farmlands within the Eastern and Western Cape areas where there are many farms that use cats for rodent control. Much of the farmlands border nature reserves with AWCs, so the likelihood of the free-roaming farm cats mating with AWCs in these areas is dangerously high. ACR teams in the Eastern and Western Cape areas explain the hybridization issue to the farmers, and also assure them that sterilizing their cats will improve the cats' health and life span. Most of the farmers happily then accept the volunteer's offer to TNR the cats.

A TNR group based in Secunda (which is near the southern half of Kruger National Park) contacted Alley Cat Rescue in 2022 with an urgent plea for assistance with the community cats living on and around the extensive property owned by the energy and chemical company, Sasol Ltd. The free-roaming cat population there is quite out of hand. We were motivated to join the TNR efforts there in particular because of the AWC hybridization threat posed by such a large number of domestic cats. We were further convinced of the need for increased TNR there when we learned that local authorities were concerned about the transmission of feline viruses such as FeLV and FIV from *Felis catus* to the local Serval population. ACR has now been involved with TNR, including vaccinations for FeLV, since May of 2022.

ACR Helps Cats in Mexico

In March of 2007, ACR visited Puerto Vallarta, Mexico along with four veterinarians and two vet techs to hold a free spay/neuter clinic. Over two days, we spayed and neutered 100 cats and dogs, including several feral cats. Many generous animal lovers helped with the clinic by volunteering, organizing, and donating supplies.

Laura Gelezunas, a Banderas News video journalist living in Puerto Vallarta, had seen the problem and contacted ACR for help. We jumped on the opportunity to take our expertise in working with stray and feral animals to help in Mexico. This was the first mash-style spay/neuter clinic that ACR had organized, and the largest clinic for Puerto Vallarta.

Along with sterilizing 100 cats and dogs, our veterinarians shared vital surgery techniques, postoperative care treatment, and tips for working with feral animals with the dedicated vets working in Puerto Vallarta, who now run their own spay/neuter clinics. There are an estimated 100,000 stray dogs and 49,000 stray cats living in the Puerto Vallarta area (Thelmadatter, 2021). The success of this clinic has prevented hundreds of thousands of unwanted animals from being born and is the first step in the fight against pet overpopulation.

Australia

There is a pervasive belief amongst Australian policy makers that outdoor cats are one of the leading threats to native wildlife. This myth has inspired several cat-culling campaigns that used disturbing lethal technology.

A relatively early campaign launched in 1999 began field trials of the experimental poison FST-2 to kill feral cats. The designers of the new poison claimed that it specifically targets cats and would not kill other animals. Other so-called "safe" poisons are now known to cause birth defects, cancer, and additional problems in both animals and humans. The designers also claimed the poison took one hour to kill the cats. However, Clive Marks of the Victoria Institute of Animal Sciences cautioned, "It is very important that we do not have cats eating a sub-lethal dose, which leaves them debilitated." Hugh Wirth, a veterinarian and then-president of Austral-

ia's RSPCA, stated that the poison was inhumane (Bonner, 1999).

In 2015, the Australian government announced a plan to kill two million cats by the year 2020. That number was based on the inaccurate estimate that there are up to 20 million feral cats on the continent (Doherty, 2019). A study published in 2017 revealed there is no scientific evidence to support the estimate and that the real number of feral cats in Australia is between 2.1 and 6.3 million (Legge et al., 2017). The campaign continues as of August 2022, well past the 2020 deadline, because the goal number of killed cats has not yet been achieved. This is more evidence that culling is an inefficient mode of cat population control.

Some local governments within Australia have introduced their own culling plans. The government of Banana Shire in Queensbury announced in 2017 a plan to decrease their outdoor cat population by incentivizing cat killing among community members with a bounty of \$10 for the pelt of an adult cat and \$5 for the pelt of a kitten.

In 2021, the Kangaroo Island Council and Mayor Michael Pengilly began introducing new technology to aid their effort to completely rid the island of its approximately 1,600 (Hohnen et al., 2020) cats. One such innovation is the Felixer trap, which uses artificial intelligence to identify passing cats by their size, shape, and speed and then spray the cats with poison.

New Zealand

As in Australia, the government of New Zealand considers cats a dangerous invasive species that threatens to wipe out many native animal species. The NZ Department of Conservation has a section about feral cats within the "Pests and Threats" section of their website. Per the

website, "We usually control feral cats [on public conservation land] as part of a wider programme targeting other invasive species such as stoats, hedgehogs and rodents" and list control techniques used as "poisoning, trapping and shooting." ("Feral Cats," accessed 2022)

Following the announcement of the Predator Free 2050 plan, which seeks to eradicate non-native predators - including stoats, rats, and possums - from the country by 2050, there were complaints from environmental groups that cats are not among the targeted species. Nonetheless, the safety of feral cats is far from guaranteed as the general belief among even cat owners in New Zealand is that pet cats are not the same as feral cats, who are to blame for hunting native wildlife (Buchanan, 2022).

Israel

Israel has a well-known outdoor cat overpopulation crisis. It stems from the introduction of cats into the area for rodent control. The original cats bred prolifically almost year-round due to the warm climate so that in the span of less than a century, Israel's outdoor cat population grew to an estimated two million (Zenebe, 2020).



Feral cat in Tel Aviv, Israel

Arnold Plotnick

When Israeli authorities first recognized the extent of the overpopulation problem, they tried some cruel and ineffective methods to correct it, including killing free-roaming city cats en masse.

For many years, both The Cat Welfare Society of Israel (CWSI) and Arad for Animals have been working tirelessly to stop the cruel poisoning of cats in Israel. In 1998, after one attack by a rabid dog in an isolated area nine kilometers outside of Arad, the city announced that it would eradicate all stray cats and dogs in Arad. After the discovery of one rabid fox in the city of Arad in 1999, officials responded by ordering the poisoning of all stray and feral cats in the area (Friedman, 1999).

The Israeli government used to use alpha-chloralose to poison cats. This poison causes convulsions and consequently a slow, painful death. It does nothing to stop the spread of rabies. Israel's Ministry of Agriculture and Veterinary Services had authorized municipal veterinarians to put out food laced with strychnine in the streets and fields. Stray animals along with companion animals would eat the poisoned food and die of asphyxiation over a period of 24 hours.

Israeli Veterinary Services claimed that the mass poisonings were necessary to protect the public from rabies (Friedman, 1998). Many scientific experts and world agencies, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), have stated that poisoning animals is not only cruel but also ineffective in controlling rabies. In fact, it increases the spread of the disease by creating vacuums into which rabid animals can then enter.

In the late 1980s, Rivi Mayer was one of the first people to suggest spaying and neutering street cats in Israel. Mayer said neutering cats is not part of Israel's culture yet and that more education needed to be done to get people to spay and neuter pet

cats and the strays they feed. One part of the problem has been that Jewish belief forbids neutering of any animal (and, though it is not said explicitly in the Bible, spaying as well).

In January 2000, CWSI, with the help of several veterinarians, trapped 70 feral cats at a kibbutz and neutered and vaccinated them in one weekend. This event led to the establishment of a TNR program for feral cats in that area.

Fortunately, the Israeli government's attitude toward cats has evolved and many current national regulations favor caring for community cats and humane population control through sterilization. In 2004, culling campaigns ceased as Israel made killing "strays" illegal (Zenebe, 2020). The website of Israel's Ministry of Environmental Protection offers guidelines for the treatment of "street cats in a legal and humane manner," ("Street Cats," 2020). In 2021, Jasmine Sax-Fridman of the Knesset (Israel's legislature), along with Agriculture Minister Oded Forer successfully passed a deal that greatly increased nation-



Feral cat in Israel at Suzana Cafe

Arnold Plotnick

al spending for the sterilization of stray cats in 2022 and 2023 (Reich, 2021).

The citizens of Israel are also becoming more interested in companion animals and in supporting humane, nonlethal control of animal populations. A lot of credit for these changes must go to the tireless work of people like Rivi Mayer from CWSI and Ellen Moshenberg, who have never given up the struggle for humane care of animals.

England

Much of today's TNR processes were developed in England. TNR pioneers such as Celia Hammond and Ruth Plant began programs in the 1950s and 60s. The non-profit, The Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW), was among the first organizations to take up the mantle of TNR study. UFAW's Assistant Director in 1977, Dr. Jenny Remfry, performed field trials investigating trapping methods and sterilization to manage cat populations. She presented her early findings in 1980 at UFAW's international symposium, titled *Ecology and Control of Feral Cats*. Another presenter at the symposium was Jane Dards, a researcher who studied feral cats. Dards reported that the cats she studied were generally in good health, rather than starving and miserable, which many people believed to be the usual condition of outdoor cats (Houser, 2018). The symposium was a historical event, instrumental in shifting attitudes toward humane treatment of feral cats.

Biologist & author Roger Tabor was the first to study feral cat colonies in the U.K. and monitored the colonies at Fitzroy Square and other sites. He found that, where cats had been eradicated, most colonies had recovered in numbers within two years. Tabor was the first to dub the tendency of cats to repopulate after eradication, "the vacuum effect."

The two largest and best-known English TNR groups are Cats Protection and the Cat Action Trust. However, several other groups, such as SNIP (Spay/Neuter Islington's Pussies) have neutered cats in part of London, and SNIP has established an international team of veterinarians who will travel to foreign countries to implement spay/neuter programs. Another internationally active organization rooted in England is International Cat Care (ICatCare). It began in the 1950s under the name the Feline Advisory Bureau, with a focus on improving veterinary care for cats. Over the years, its mission grew to encompass all forms of cat care, including the management of community cats. Today, ICatCare is a strong supporter of TNR.

Another group in England is The Celia Hammond Animal Trust (CHAT), founded in 1986. Over the years, CHAT has sterilized thousands of feral cats, and now has two veterinary clinics where they provide low-cost surgeries, as well as a dedicated cat rehoming/sanctuary center. Celia Hammond, who over 30 years ago gave up a lucrative modeling career to help cats, told *Your Cat* magazine that she thinks she has helped rescue more than 50,000 cats over the years.

In 2021, researchers calculated for the first time in history an estimated number of stray cats living in UK cities. They found that there are around 250,000 urban strays and believe some of the reason for the large population is because people were not able or too afraid to get their pet cats fixed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bryant, 2021).

France

Famous French model, actress, and singer, Brigitte Bardot, became known for her animal rights activism. In 1986, she established the Brigitte Bardot Foundation for the Welfare and Protection of Animals,

which has helped thousands of feral cats through spay/neuter programs.

TNR was officially made the primary course of action to control community cat populations in France in 2015 ("Population Management at EU Level," 2022). The law was amended to say that unowned cats could only be taken to shelters when implementing TNR was impossible in a given municipality.

Greece

Visitors to Greece immediately see the many cats roaming the streets, laying around archaeological sites, and of course loitering around tavernas looking for a handout. In many ways, Greece offers an ideal atmosphere for outdoor cats with its year-round mild weather and array of street vendors. This partly explains why unowned outdoor cats abound there and can be seen daily wandering the streets. In fact, Greece has among the largest number of stray cats (and dogs) in the world (Smith, 2021).

Prior to Greece's inclusion in the European Union in 1981, the general Greek attitude toward street cats was ambivalent at best. TNR was not considered, and some people killed feral cats without recourse because they considered the cats a nuisance. However, pressure from the EU to conform to other member nations' higher standards for animal welfare sparked a change in Greek perception of cats and a powerful TNR and rescue movement grew among private citizens, who formed nonprofit organizations to tackle the problem of cat overpopulation.

Animal Protection Aegina Agistri (APAA) operates a large-scale TNR program on the two islands in its name. The organization relies on help from community members, veterinarians, and local governments to achieve impressive sterilization numbers

every year.

Nine Lives Greece was formed in 2006 with the mission "to improve conditions for existing and future felines in Athens and beyond." (Nine Lives Greece, n.d.) In addition to TNR, Nine Lives has a feeding program that feeds around 500 stray cats daily in Athens (Nine Lives Greece, n.d.). The organization ensures the cats stay healthy. Local shopkeepers and restaurateurs help look after the cats and allow them to live in and around the buildings.

Italy

A remarkable law was adopted in 1998 in Rome. It guarantees cats the right to live where they are born. This means that they are allowed to live in their homes whether these may be in the Coliseum, the Teatro di Marcello, Trajan's Market, or the Caius Cestius Pyramid. It has been estimated that Rome has around 10,000 cat colonies. Many of the cats are now sterilized thanks to the efforts of a few caring individuals (Natoli et al., 2006).

Torre Argentina, Rome's Cat Sanctuary, is one such organization helping to care for around 250 cats, who find shelter in some of the oldest temples in Rome (400-300 BC). Every day volunteers from different countries feed, clean, and care for the cats. Tourists are welcomed to wander the ruins, visiting with the cats and stopping by the gift shop. Patrons are also encouraged to "adopt" a cat to help continue their life-long care.

Venetians believe that their city was saved from the devastating plague of 1348 by their cats who killed the diseased rats. After visiting Venice in 1964, English tourist, Helena Sanders formed a group called Dingo to spay and neuter many of the cat colonies. Venice also adopted a law to guarantee cats the right to live in freedom (Natoli et al., 2006). Dingo helped to stabilize and reduce colonies using TNR. Thirty years

ago the cats numbered around 12,000. The success of Dingo in Venice, using nonlethal control, is a model for other cities to emulate. Venice has been very successful at controlling its cat population, which was down to 2,000 in 2017 (Wang, 2017).

Feral cats enjoy some significant protections throughout Italy as a whole, as well as within individual cities. The Italian Parliament passed Law no. 281 in 1991, which protects community cats against being eradicated or ejected from their urban locations (Natoli et al., 2019).



Louise Holton

The Torre Argentina cat sanctuary in Rome, Italy, has about 250 cats living among the ruins.

Portugal

Animias de Rua (AdR) was founded in 2005 to help the street cats of Porto, Portugal. At the time, Portugal had very few organizations working for feral cat welfare. AdR began a TNR program for one colony of 45 cats (“Partnership With Animais De Rua,” accessed 2022) and have since helped thousands of animals. AdR is now one of Portugal’s premier animal welfare organizations in Porto and other parts of the country.

Singapore

“Saving lives through enriching more minds.”

This great statement is the mantra of The Cat Welfare Society in Singapore. It works closely with town councils, housing boards, environmental agencies, and the Veterinary Authority of Singapore to resolve cat issues effectively and humanely. The Cat Welfare Society of Singapore wishes to cultivate a community outreach movement to reach people with the message of responsibility and tolerance. The group helps communities resolve issues related to community and outdoor cats.

China

Beijing is infamous for rounding up and killing thousands of feral and abandoned cats in preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Four years later, it experienced the typical outcome to round-up-and-kill — the cats came back (Bruno, 2012).

Mary Peng, co-founder of the International Center for Veterinary Services in Beijing says China does not have the tradition of neutering pets. Peng is a Chinese-American, a native New Yorker who has lived in Beijing for the last 20 years. She has taken on the mission of convincing Beijing’s residents that the best solution to the feral cat population is TNR. Peng says Beijing learned in the recent past that exterminating cats just leads to a new colony eventually moving back in. Of course the mass killing of adorable kittens usually causes an uproar.

Peng offers clinics in English and in Chinese on TNR. She helps identify care pro-

viders, or cat feeders, to help get them involved with TNR. Cats are sterilized and given rabies vaccines. (China has a big human rabies problem; around 3,000 people die of rabies each year.)

Peng has a good example of a reduced, TNR'd colony. In 2006, 23 cats in a colony were trapped. As with every colony some were taken in and adopted, and today only five cats remain. "We proved to the community it can be done here," she says (Bruno, 2012).

Through the work of cat welfare advocates like Peng, TNR is slowly gaining traction within China. This is extremely important as the Chinese national government disseminates information linking stray animals to the spread of zoonotic diseases, including COVID-19, which has caused horrible instances of cruelty to dogs and cats living on the street. Fortunately, the voices of animal lovers are strong in China, and growing stronger. One can find examples of TNR programs scattered around the country. The government of Hangzhou funded such a program to get a handle on their community cat population of about 300,000 (Kong and Yao, 2014). Within a year, over 600 cats had been sterilized through the program (Ke, 2015).

Hawaii (U.S. State Worth Special Mention)

The English explorer James Cook brought cats to the islands of Hawaii in the late 18th century. Cats were valued members of the early sailing ships because they helped control the rodent populations. Mark Twain toured the island of Kauai in 1866 and said: "I saw cats: Tom cats, Mary Ann cats, long-tailed cats, bobtail cats, blind cats, black cats, tame cats, wild cats, platoons of cats, companies of cats" (Twain,

1975).

companion animal, Kauai has a large population of feral cats. Several Kauai natives such as Dottie Beach, a retired board member of the Kauai Humane Society, take care of the community cats. Islanders also feed cats at the beach and at the many hotels and resorts. Unfortunately, not all hotels show compassion towards the cats and some call in "bounty hunters" who often use cruel methods to kill the cats.

Other islands like Oahu and Maui have groups such as The Feline Foundation, Hawaii Cat Foundation, and AdvoCATS, all implementing TNR programs for feral cats. The Hawaiian Humane Society has spayed and neutered over 11,000 feral cats for 1,417 feral cat caretakers since 1993. In total, these groups have neutered over 75,000 cats through their low-cost spay neuter programs.

The Feral Cat Task Force of Kauai says the answer to the feral cat problem is to step up education efforts and strengthen local laws. The group is working hard to reach its goal of "zero feral, abandoned and stray cats on the island by the year 2025" (Moriki, 2014).

At the beginning of the year 2000, Hawaii's Department of Health came up with a plan to amend the Vector Control policy and to implement a ban on the outdoor feeding of free roaming cats. ACR joined with several groups on the islands and rushed letters, faxes, and emails to the Health Department and the Governor opposing the feeding ban and expressing support for properly managed, well-fed colonies of cats.

After the public outpouring of support for the caretakers and the cats, the state agreed to look at legislation allowing them to study the feral cat issue. There are at least 18 groups in Hawaii implementing TNR on the different islands.

Conclusion

If you are an animal lover and cannot stand seeing neglected animals anywhere, there are several international organizations you can contact, before you travel, for information on how to get help for these animals. Please refer to Addendum 5 in the back of the handbook for a list of organizations.

And when you hear the environmental groups vilify cats and use them as scapegoats for the damage done to the planet, remind them to take heed of the United Nations-sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. The report states that humans are rapidly transforming the environment, converting more land into farmland since the end of World War II than in the 18th and 19th centuries combined. The report continues, noting that even these new farmlands have been exploited and pollute

ed to meet the rising demands of humans for food, water, and raw materials, and that up to 30 percent of mammal, bird, and amphibian species are at risk of extinction due to habitat loss and human actions (Blua, 2005).

There are community cats living all across the world. As they did centuries ago, they still play a vital role in controlling rodent populations. Rodents do far more damage to birds and other wildlife than cats and are also vectors of diseases, such as the plague, to humans. Let us keep pushing for humane, nonlethal management of feral cat populations.

Alley Cat Rescue's commitment is to help stray and outdoor community cats in the United States and worldwide, and to implement humane care to help improve their lives, put an end to cat overpopulation, and reduce the number of feral cats living in colonies.