

Recommendations to veterinarians for control and management of feral cats.

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Historically there have been no by-laws either drawn up or applied to cats. Due to this, the onus has largely fallen on the local veterinarians, the public and welfare organisations to deal with the problems that arise. There are cost implications as well as public health issues at stake. The SAVA is trying to get municipalities involved and have their support but in the meantime the following is a list of recommendations for private veterinarians to give out to their clients and to help educate the general public on feral cats.

We need to differentiate between un-owned stray cats and feral cat colonies. Many so-called ferals who cause havoc in peoples' homes are merely stray cats. Strays have a bad reputation for fighting with domestic cats and spreading diseases through fighting. The following document discusses feral cat colonies, not typical stray cats. True ferals should be treated as any other form of wildlife, with respect.

Feral cat colonies need to be managed humanely. Urban ferals perform a useful function in controlling vermin such as rats, mice, cockroaches and pigeons. On the other hand, they can also reach population levels whereby they are impacting our local wildlife and biodiversity and as such can become detrimental to indigenous birds, frogs, reptiles and mammals. Feral cats also interbreed with the African Wild Cat and this pollutes the gene pool of the wild populations.

Feral cats do aid in disease control and therefore have a useful function in public health. Here, education of the public and municipalities is important. The presence of a small neutered colony, as opposed to complete eradication, has prevented re-occupation of the territory by un-neutered cats. It has been shown that culling alone results in more cats moving into the area. Rather, an organised system of providing for colonies should be established. Municipalities should be encouraged to improve waste management behind all restaurants and food distribution centres where cats meet.

The aim should be to limit the number in colonies so that they can be more easily managed. Management of colonies should be the responsibility of the municipality but unfortunately this is probably not realistic. This is often left up to the public, welfare organisations and private veterinarians. No kittens should be born to replace cats that die. The size of the colony will thus be controlled.

Catch, sterilise, ear tip (right ear) and release programs need to be implemented. Both males and females should be sterilised. (Generally it is only a few males that sire most or all of the kittens).

Vaccination and de-worming can also be considered depending on circumstance. It is necessary to cull sick, injured or maimed cats. Cages to trap cats can possibly be hired from SPCA s or local vets but it is necessary to give clear instructions on the humane use of traps.

Suggestions for feral cats:

1. Trapping: this needs to be done by committed people who understand the time and patience it requires.
 - First, get the cats used to being fed daily which ensures that they will gather at the feeding point and get used to people being around them.
 - Then place a trap near the feeding area so they can get used to its presence for a few days.
 - It is important that the relevant people can gain access to the property, especially over weekends when it is often quieter and trapping can be more effective.
 - Ensure that the management and ground staff know enough about the program to either help or not interfere. Ideally, traps should not be left unsupervised as cats may be hurt and uninformed people may interfere. However, practically this is often not possible. Persons supervising will often frighten away the cats, and often the traps need to be left overnight, with a blanket over one end for shelter (while ensuring it does not interfere with the trip mechanism), and food and water inside. The name and cell number of the person involved in the trapping is written prominently on the cage. Thus, if the cage is discovered by uninformed persons, they have the opportunity to call the person involved and find out what's happening, or to let them know a cat has been trapped.
 - Kittens under three months of age may be able to be 'tamed' and homed: assess each one individually. They can be sterilised from as young as 6 weeks of age.
 - Sick, injured and old cats may need to be euthanased depending on the circumstances. We should also advise that cats with white ears should be euthanased due to the inevitability of solar induced skin cancer. Animal welfare organisations can be approached to assist here.
2. Sterilise trapped cats. In most instances, it would be best for the people trapping the cats to transport them to the private vet or welfare centre immediately and then the veterinarian can do the procedure when it is most suitable. One should use absorbable suture material in the skin layer.
3. Right ear tip: remove the tip of the right ear so sterilised cats can be identified easily without being trapped or, if they are trapped, they can be released immediately. When the cat is anaesthetised place a straight artery forceps flat across the ear tip, approximately 3mm from the point of the ear. Leave the forceps on while the cat is sterilised then remove the forceps and cut straight through the middle of the clamped area with scissors. This minimises bleeding. The ear must be cut flat and not notched as the latter may be mistaken for fight wounds.



4. Vaccinate: rabies vaccination should be done but recognise it will not provide assured long term immunity. We do not routinely recommend other vaccinations or testing for viral infections because of cost implications and limited or no

- immunity being gained from a single vaccination. Note also that some colonies have endemic respiratory virus infections.
5. De-worm: this is important from a public health perspective so funding should be included for this. New products that can be used topically are ideal.
 6. Release - back into their own feral colony if at all possible. Relocation may cause problems and must be considered carefully if the cat cannot be released back into its 'own area'.
 7. No feral cat colonies should be encouraged in or near protected areas. These areas are set aside to protect and maintain biodiversity and cats are detrimental to this aim.

Maintaining / supporting the colony

1. Most colonies do need to be fed to be strong enough to hunt effectively and to withstand the stress placed on them. After trapping and sterilisation has been done, feeding can be reduced to every second day or twice a week depending on the colony/circumstance. Note that, while there are predators naturally, they do not occur in high densities. People should not feed ad lib, allowing cats to persist, and hunt, at densities way beyond carrying capacity.
2. Shelter requirements depend on the area of the colony and whether cats can find their own shelter. If shelters are placed, permission would need to be given by the owners' of the property. Also ensure the shelters can't be used as traps.
3. Colonies should be monitored by a carer who should report any new cats arriving in the area as these may be unsterilised or sick / injured.

Municipalities should contribute financially to the feral spay / neuter programmes so that veterinarians, volunteers and welfare organisations do not bear the brunt of these costs. Costs should not be the responsibility of the veterinarian. Guidelines need to be introduced and municipalities should assist with the cost and the ruling on the control and protocols introduced. This would be the ideal but it may not be achievable. If private veterinarians have a large feral cat population that is brought to their attention and require the assistance of other private veterinarians, please bring it to the attention of one of the branch committee members and they will try to assist.

Although some Animal Welfare Organisations do hire out traps, unfortunately they often don't have the time and/or resources to train the people that hire these traps. Trapping must be done with a lot of patience and correct knowledge to ensure humane handling of cats and to limit stress. For this reason, information and education in the correct trapping and handling procedures needs to be supplied with the traps.

What we are aiming for is control set out by the municipalities and by-laws being implemented. Regulatory approaches on their own will not solve all of the cat problems. Compulsory neutering, registration and curfew are difficult to enforce. They need to be supplemented by a carefully planned mix of non-regulatory approaches that emphasise compliance with the standards we set for responsible behaviour by pet owners. Responsible pet ownership can be encouraged by on-going awareness and education of the public. Animal Welfare Organisations can play a pivotal role here. Local and state veterinarians can also be called on to talk to the public. Individuals are more likely to comply with laws they think are reasonable and fair. Municipalities need to co-ordinate educational efforts to encourage responsible pet ownership. Including welfare organisations and private veterinarians in discussions and decisions can help achieve this goal.