

No-Kill Movement Means Death for Birds

Guest editorial by Travis Longcore, Ph.D.

In recent years it has become seemingly obligatory for local politicians to commit to taking a “no-kill” approach to animal control in their jurisdictions. That news might not raise the concerns of the typical bird conservationist, who may think that this simply means that unfortunate stray animals would be held in shelters long enough to find homes. But the no-kill movement is not innocuous – its mission is to stop euthanasia of any healthy cat or dog, no matter whether that animal has no prospects for a home, is feral, or is dangerously aggressive.

A fundamental element of a no-kill approach is to implement a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program for unowned cats, which stops stray and feral cats from being taken to shelters and instead promotes the unrestricted feeding and maintenance of cat colonies outdoors by “caregivers.” Bird conservationists therefore need to start paying attention to animal sheltering legislation or risk not being able to remove stray and feral cats from places where they threaten birds, whether they be back yards or nature reserves.

This no-kill approach for stray and feral cats results in increasing numbers of free-ranging cats, maintained in groups concentrated around feeding stations. Some of these cats are even redeemed from shelters by so-called rescuers and intentionally placed outside into new or existing colonies. TNR policies are generally coupled with an abandonment by local jurisdictions of traditional animal control functions for stray and feral cats. Once a TNR program is in place, rules are changed so that it becomes illegal or extremely difficult to trap and take a feral cat to an animal shelter. Cats that have been neutered and are being fed outdoors are marked by cutting off the tip of one ear, and shelters receiving such cats will return them to the person feeding them or to any “rescue” group. In jurisdictions implementing TNR, it can become a crime to interfere with cat feeders, even if the cats number in the dozens and become a nuisance in parks, alleys, and residential neighborhoods. This situation can occur almost overnight, because most states do not require that local jurisdictions control unowned cats, only unowned dogs.

The no-kill movement represents a radical agenda that prioritizes unowned cats and the rights of cat feeders over the welfare of birds and other wildlife and the rights of people who enjoy and care about them. When confronted with the staggering number of individual mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and birds killed by free-roaming cats, the response by no-kill advocates is often that this does not matter, unless wildlife populations as a whole are affected. To quote one such advocate from a social networking site: “Even if it were true that cats kill

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500 million birds a year, that figure still does not tell me anything. I also need to know how many birds in total die annually, and how many get born.” Scientists have documented that high predation levels can affect wildlife populations, but the more troubling issue is that feral cat advocates appear unable to feel compassion for the unnecessary suffering of hundreds of millions of individual birds and other animals, even while they insist that euthanasia of a single feral cat is immoral and reprehensible.

Bird conservationists must be honest about the options. There are many methods of promoting responsible pet ownership to reduce the number of stray animals, including roaming ordinances, low-cost and mandatory spay/neuter practices, per-household pet limits, and cat licensing laws. Effective control of free-roaming cats requires aggressive efforts that almost always will include euthanasia. And like any nuisance animal control program, the efforts must be sustained. Sanctuaries are not economically viable, cannot possibly address the magnitude of the problem, and all too often end up as hoarding situations. Given the harm done by feral cats directly to wildlife, and the risks they pose to both human and wildlife health, permanent removal must remain as an option for any strategy to protect the places birds live and breed.

Bird conservationists must also continue to articulate the importance of birds in our lives by educating the public about the nuances of the lives of birds – their intelligence, their documented communication and problem-solving skills, and their beauty – to help others understand why we care, and why the casual dismissal of hundreds of millions of annual deaths is a callous affront.



Dr. Longcore is Science Director of The Urban Wildlands Group, which, along with co-plaintiffs including ABC, successfully sued to halt implementation of a TNR program in the City of Los Angeles until environmental review of the consequences of the program is undertaken.