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Cats and Wildlife: A New Approach to Addressing Cat Over-Population in the Portland Metropolitan Region

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ABSTRACT: Throughout the country, efforts to reduce cat over-population have led to highly acrimonious confrontations between bird advocates and cat advocates. The situation in Portland, Oregon provides a rare exception to this rule. The Audubon Society of Portland and the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon have a long history of working collaboratively. The two organizations, in conjunction with local animal shelters, have launched an aggressive effort to address both cat over-population and bird predation in ways that are good for both cats and birds and which respect the values of both cat and bird advocates. The *Cats Safe at Home*[™] Campaign includes landscape scale population reduction efforts including Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR), targeted removal from natural areas, targeted education and enforcement at hotspots such as apartment complexes, and shelter-based strategies. It also includes maintaining legal mechanisms for property owners that want to remove cats from their own properties, indemnity for native predatory species such as coyotes that prey upon free-roaming cats, best management practices for caring for feral cat colonies, and research into the efficacy of population control efforts on the ground and attitudinal changes of the local human population regarding free-roaming cats. Some have suggested that this approach, and specifically the inclusion of TNR based strategies, is akin to waving the white flag on cat predation of birds. We see it as exactly the opposite. We believe that the Portland Metropolitan Region has the potential to make real headway on an issue that has seen little evidence of success anywhere in the continental United States over the past century. We have a community that cares passionately about its animals; we have outstanding and well-supported domestic and wild animal advocacy organizations; and we have an aggressive agenda to reduce cat over-population. We believe that by adopting a range of strategies that include TNR, by working together, and by focusing on results, positive change is within our reach.

KEY WORDS: Audubon Society of Portland, birds, cat, *Felis catus*, Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon, feral cat, predation, trap-neuter-return, wildlife

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INTRODUCTION

Across the nation, in community after community, debates between cat advocates and bird advocates about how to address cat overpopulation issues have grown increasingly ugly and rancorous. Amid this maelstrom, the Portland Metropolitan Region has been gaining increased attention for the fact that our local bird advocates and cat advocates work together to address cat over-population issues. Audubon Society of Portland the leading avian advocacy organization in the area, and the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon (FCCO) the primary Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) organization in the area, work quite closely together and we have done so since the 1990s. This paper provides information about how this relationship evolved and information about joint efforts that are currently underway.

Audubon Society of Portland was founded in 1902 to “inspire people to love and protect nature.” Today it is the largest chapter of the National Audubon Society with over 14,000 members and 27 FTE staff. The issue of cat predation on birds is not new to Audubon. One of Audubon’s founders, William Finley, wrote in his seminal work *American Birds* (Finley 1907) that “We have tried every lawful way of getting rid of stray cats, for they are the most persistent enemies that birds have.... A man may be fined for killing a bird, but he may keep a cat that kills a hundred.” Audubon Society of Portland (hereafter “Audubon”) has records from its wildlife

hospital dating back to the 1940s highlighting cat predation as a key cause of wildlife injury (Elliott 1944). Today, nearly 40% of the 3,000 animals brought to Audubon’s Wildlife Care Center are cat related either caught by cats, orphaned by cats, or fledglings “rescued” by the public to prevent imminent cat predation. Between 1987 and 2006, Audubon’s wildlife hospital treated more 20,000 cat-caught animals, representing more than 100 local species. These animals have some of the lowest survival rates of any of the injuries seen at the Audubon wildlife hospital, and they represent only a small sample of what is happening out on the landscape (Sallinger 2008).

The FCCO was founded in 1995 to “improve the welfare and reduce the population of feral and stray cats through spay/neuter programs and education.” Since its founding, the FCCO has spayed and neutered more than 65,000 cats utilizing the strategy of TNR.

Habitat loss and fragmentation is by far the most significant cause of bird population declines, and Audubon spends the vast majority of its resources focused on habitat-based initiatives. However, at a time when approximately 1 out of every 3 bird species in North America is experiencing serious long-term declines, we also cannot afford to ignore other major causes of bird mortality such as window strikes, pesticides, power lines, poaching and yes, cat predation (NABCI 2009). The question is not whether we need to address cat predation,

but rather what the most effective strategies are going to be moving forward.

The trend nationwide has been to focus debate on the strategy known as Trap-Neuter-Return in which feral cats are trapped, spayed/neutered, and then returned to colonies where volunteers provide food as the cats live out their lives. There has also been a related focus on reducing the number of cats killed at animal shelters, with some shelters adopting the more extreme approach of simply releasing cats into the environment that are not able to be adopted. Some national cat advocacy organizations have taken to denying that impacts of cat predation on birds represent a significant threat. Bird conservation organizations have appropriately been alarmed by initiatives that often seem indifferent to the impact that cats can have on native wildlife.

At the same time, cat advocates have been reacting to persistent calls by some bird advocacy organizations to increase resources on rounding-up and killing feral cats. Beyond the moral and ethical considerations raised by industrial-scale killing of America's favorite pet, there are also practical considerations. Killing cats has been the dominant paradigm of cat control strategies for more than a century in the United States, and it has not worked. Feral, stray, and free-roaming cats continue to proliferate across the U.S., and there is no reason to think that simply doubling down on lethal control of feral, stray, and free-roaming cats is going to be any more effective going forward than it has been in the past. Changing norms regarding lethal control of companion animals and shrinking funding resources for animal shelter programs only increase the challenges associated with this approach.

In the Portland Metropolitan Region, groups that include Audubon, FCCO, Multnomah County Animal Services, and the Bonnie L. Hayes Small Animal Shelter have been working together as a coalition to develop an approach to reducing cat over-population that respects the values of both cat and bird lovers; utilizes and adaptively manages a variety of strategies to address cat over-population; and that ultimately aims to effect meaningful reduction in the number of free-roaming cats on the landscape. This paper provides information on the *Cats Safe at Home*[™] Campaign, which is being implemented in the Portland Metropolitan Region.

ORIGINS OF A PARTNERSHIP

The question often arises as to how the Audubon Society and FCCO came to work together. The answer is quite simple. When the FCCO was founded in 1995, there was an expectation that there would be significant conflict between the objectives of Audubon and the FCCO. In fact, Audubon received repeated phone calls from the local media during that time period looking for quotes denigrating the TNR approach. However, a review of the FCCO mission statement to "improve the welfare and reduce the population of feral and stray cats through spay/neuter programs and education" indicated that there might be opportunity to find common ground and collaborative approaches. Further, direct meetings between the two organizations resulted in a mutual understanding that both organizations were focused on

achieving the same outcome: a significant overall reduction in the number of feral, stray, and free-roaming pet cats on the landscape. In addition, both organizations were willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of one another's concerns. In the case of Audubon, it meant recognizing that a significant portion of the community places a high value on cats and wants to see humane, non-lethal solutions put into effect whenever possible. In the case of the FCCO, it meant acknowledging that a significant portion of the community places a high value on protection of wildlife and that predation of native birds by free-roaming cats is a legitimate concern that should be addressed. The significance of establishing a real and deep understanding and respect for one another's missions cannot be overstated in terms of building a basis for long-term collaboration on this issue. Agreement on several basic principles also facilitated the potential for growing trust and collaboration over time. These included the following:

- Emphasis on protecting birds and cats rather than bird versus cats
- Recognition that caring about cats and caring about birds are not mutually exclusive
- Focus on long-term solutions rather than symptoms; specifically, responsible pet ownership to stem the flow of new cats into the environment
- Use of local statistics rather than national studies in order to make the issues immediate, real, and intelligible for our community
- Recognition that both organizations need to reach far broader audiences in order to be effective on this issue, and that this could best be achieved by working together.

In 2007, an article in the *New York Times Magazine* described the relationship between Audubon and the FCCO as "a rare détente" in the world of cat and bird advocacy organizations (Barcott 2007).

CATS SAFE AT HOME[™] CAMPAIGN

In 2014, Audubon, the FCCO, Multnomah County Animal Services, and the Bonnie L. Hayes Animal Shelter formalized an agreement outlining the components of the *Cats Safe at Home*[™] Campaign. The Campaign's policy statement can be found as Appendix I.

EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS CURRENTLY OCCURRING IN THE PORTLAND METRO REGION

This unique partnership has allowed the collaborators to move forward on a variety of strategies. Examples include the following:

Catio Tour: In 2013, the 4 collaborating organizations presented the first annual "Catio Tour." This 1-day event allowed participants to take a self-guided tour of homes in the Portland area that had constructed outdoor enclosures for cats. Registration was anticipated to be in the range of 100, but ultimately had to be cut off more than a week before the event when it surpassed six 600 participants. Surveys of participants' perceptions of outdoor cats were collected after the event. It is anticipated that this will become an annual event.

Complementary Messaging: The 4 collaborating organizations have adopted complementary messaging on websites and other communication mediums to reinforce the importance of reducing the number of free-roaming cats and their impacts on native wildlife. Strategic joint outreach efforts are planned throughout the year.

Targeted Programming at Apartment Complexes: Multnomah County Animal Control and the Feral Cat Coalition have initiated a program called Apartment Cat Team, targeting residents of apartment complexes that have been identified as a primary source of feral and free roaming cats.

Surveys: In conjunction with Portland State University, Audubon and the Feral Cat Coalition have initiated surveys to gauge public attitudes towards cats and identify effective strategies for influencing the behavior of cat owners. These results of these surveys will be available in spring 2014.

Field Research: In conjunction with the Alliance for Contraception in Cats & Dogs and the Great Basin Bird Observatory, long-term field studies will be initiated in fall 2014 to evaluate the efficacy of TNR and associated outreach efforts at one of Portland's largest known feral cat colonies. This research will span 4 different land-use types: residential, commercial, industrial, and natural area.

CONCLUSION

Currently the cat over-population reduction efforts in the Portland Metropolitan Region are garnering attention in large part because of the collaborative nature of our work in an arena that is primarily marked by conflict. However, the efficacy of these efforts will ultimately be judged by the change that is accomplished on the landscape and in the way in which our community defines responsible cat ownership.

Some of the things we are trying will be controversial they will run counter to the traditional rhetoric espoused by one side or the other in this debate. However, we believe that new strategies, new ideas, and new collaborations are necessary to make real progress that has eluded cat and wildlife advocates for more than a century. We are learning as we go and we are sure course corrections will need to be made, but we are committed to moving forward together on this issue to find solutions that are good for cats and good for wildlife.

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Cats Safe at Home™ Policy Statement

Last Updated 2-04-2014

Vision: An urban landscape where all cats are safe at home resulting in a safer and healthier environment for both cats and wildlife.

Goal: To humanely reduce and prevent free roaming pet, stray and feral cat populations in the Portland Metropolitan Area by integrating a range of strategies that are good for both cats and wildlife.

Objective: Integrate an aggressive Cats Safe at Home™ outreach campaign with a variety humane and ecologically responsible on-the-ground strategies for reducing and preventing free-roaming pet, stray, and feral cat populations that includes appropriate prioritization for short and long-term action.

Overview and Context:

More than 200 species of birds utilize the Portland Metropolitan Region for some portion of their annual cycle. This includes breeding, migratory and wintering populations. Consistent with trends nationwide, approximately 25% of these species are experiencing significant long term population declines. This includes not only species listed as threatened or endangered, but also many species that we still take for granted such as rufous hummingbirds, mourning doves and our state bird, the western meadowlark. The primary cause of reduced bird populations is habitat loss and fragmentation, but other causes of mortality such as window strikes, pesticides, and predation by introduced species add to the pressure on native birds. This can be especially true in urbanized areas where birds are concentrated into smaller and smaller habitat patches.

Simultaneously, cat overpopulation is the leading cause of death for cats in the United States. While cats entering shelters in the Portland area are far more likely to find a home than in most communities, overpopulation is still a problem. There are more cats born than there are available homes. This results in unnecessary suffering and significantly shortened life-spans as cats are dumped and left to fend for themselves, lost, and/or injured by humans, traffic, and other predators.

Our region has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in creating ecologically sustainable and healthily landscapes for people, pets, and for wildlife as well as in engaging the community in stewardship of the natural world. Regardless of whether a species is endangered, threatened, declining or still healthy, our community values its wildlife and its pets and wants to see both protected and healthy. By addressing the root causes of cat over-population and promoting responsible cat ownership, we will prevent cat predation on wild birds, reduce the flow of new cats into feral cat populations, and improve the health and wellness of free-roaming pets and strays.

Strategies to Effectively Protect both Cats and Birds:

Successful reduction of free roaming pets, strays and feral cat populations requires collaboration and an array of strategies, employed on multiple scales. While free roaming, stray and feral cats can have an impact on native birds and other wildlife anywhere on the landscape, it is recognized that some limited locations, such as designated wildlife areas and natural areas, should be prioritized for reduction of existing cat populations and prevention of establishment of new populations. On the rest of the landscape, longer-term strategies such as targeted education and outreach campaigns, spay and neuter programs, and TNR are appropriate. Ultimately, we will establish clear and measurable objectives and benchmarks. Specifically, Cats Safe at Home™ aims to accomplish the following:

- **Public Outreach and Educational Campaign:** Promoting responsible cat ownership focused on education and outreach to reduce free roaming pet, stray and feral cat populations. Positive and consistent messaging will emphasize the importance of keeping cats safe at home by using a variety of methods to benefit both cats and wildlife in the Portland Metro Area. Effort will be made to avoid messaging that is ambiguous or silent on the overall goal of reducing free-roaming cats across the landscape.
- **Landscape scale reduction of cat overpopulation:** Promoting reduction of free-roaming, stray and feral cat populations through a variety of methods including spay and neuter programs, Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) and shelter-based strategies.
- **Removal of cats from designated natural areas and designated critical habitat areas:** Recognizing that certain locations have been set aside specifically for wildlife and prioritizing those locations for removal of free roaming, stray and feral cats.
- **Safeguards for property owners who want to protect wildlife on their land:** Maintaining nuisance laws that provide property owners/ managers with effective, legal methods to address cats that come onto their property.
- **Indemnity for native predatory species that may prey upon free roaming, stray and feral cats:** Impacts on free roaming cats will not be recognized as a legitimate basis for the trapping, relocation or lethal control of native species that may prey upon free-roaming cats such as coyotes and raccoons.
- **Responsible management of feral cat colonies that minimizes the risk of attracting, habituating and otherwise impacting native wildlife populations:** TNR caregivers will be educated and required to follow Best Management Practices (BMPs) that reduces the risk of attracting wildlife populations to feeding areas in order to minimize risk of habituation of wildlife, disease transmission, and creation of wildlife nuisance situations such as unnaturally large congregations of wildlife populations.
- **Scientific Research and Adaptive Management:** Ongoing rigorous assessment and evaluation of our impacts on cat over-population and on the behaviors and perceptions of the public around this issue.
- **Transparent Reporting:** so the public can see, understand and access the programs that are being used.