

Editorial | Island Voices

Ban on feeding feral cats would be good for the cats, residents, Hawaii

By Christopher A. Lepczyk and Daniel Rubinoff
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COURTESY PHOTO

A stray cat paid little attention to park users as it took advantage of food put out by cat lovers at Kakaako Waterfront Park back in 2009.

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Feral cats are a growing environmental problem across Hawaii.

The feral cat issue in the state is clearly fraught with emotion, but, after working on the problem for several years, we can rest assured that it is no longer one without facts.

Based upon published, scientific research, we found that over 85 percent of Hawaii's people do not enjoy seeing feral cats on the landscape — including public lands — and want their numbers reduced. This number holds true across different sectors of the public, including Native Hawaiians, animal welfare members, hunters, the agricultural sector and conservationists across all of the main islands.

Beyond just wanting numbers reduced, we also found that trap neuter return (TNR) was the least acceptable form of management among those currently available. In other words, there is clear public support to address the feral cat problem on public lands and to switch from TNR to an effective method of management.

Feral cats, such as those living in the innumerable cat colonies on public lands across the state, live very short lives compared to their indoor counterparts and often persist under inhumane conditions. In fact, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals considers management options such as TNR as an inhumane option for managing feral cats.

Unfortunately, approaches like TNR as currently espoused by a variety of animal welfare organizations in Hawaii are not grounded in science, but guided by emotion instead. There has never been any hard science or peer-reviewed scientific data that demonstrates that TNR is effective in reducing feral cat numbers.

Approaches like TNR are ultimately designed to keep cats on the landscape, and not to reduce their population. The truth is, cats are neither wildlife nor part of Hawaiian ecosystems; by any scientific standard; they are an invasive species.

We need to work together to encourage responsible pet ownership, licensing efforts, spaying and neutering of cats, and keeping cats indoors. The reward is longer-lived, healthier cats and a better environment for both people and native Hawaiian wildlife.

Across the history of Hawaii, there are reports over 100 years old noting the growing problem of feral cats on public lands. In that time we have seen widespread extinctions of native species, in part due to cat predation. Moreover, there has been a marked rise in cat-associated diseases like toxoplasmosis, which poses a severe risk to both wildlife and humans.

Hawaii has a chance to lead the nation and make significant advances in both animal welfare, conservation, and health by passing Senate Bill 2450. This bill would ban feeding of feral cats on public lands, expanding on existing laws that ban feeding other animal species.

The bill would not stop individuals from adopting cats or re-homing them. It also would not ban outdoor cats on private lands.

This is simply a bill to stop allowing the illegal use of public lands by a set of private individuals engaged in an activity most people in the state do not support.

People who feed feral cats on public lands, be it the University of Hawaii-Manoa

campus or the Hawaii Kai Park and Ride are, in essence, breaking the public trust by committing a "taking."

They are using space that belongs to everyone for their own personal pleasure at the expense of others, and wildlife.

Now is the time to make progress on the feral cat issue, and the current bill is a step in the right direction. We owe it to ourselves, and to Hawaii.

This piece was co-signed by David C. Duffy, Ph.D., of the Pacific Cooperative Studies Unit, Department of Botany at UH-Manoa; and Linda J. Cox, Ph.D., community economic development specialist at UH-Manoa's Department of Natural Resources & Environmental Management..