

The HSUS and the Hawaii Coalition for the Protection of Cats and Wildlife

Last year, The HSUS began discussions in Hawaii with statewide humane organizations and local, state, and federal wildlife protection agencies to discuss the issues concerning cats and wildlife. Hawaii has a number of threatened and endangered wildlife who face many threats.

One outcome of these discussions has been The HSUS' contracting with Ward Research, a Hawaii-based research firm, to conduct focus groups and statewide surveys of more than 400 cat owners and caretakers across Hawaii, including those who may feed free-roaming cats.

Our goal was to take a first step in determining attitudes regarding the care of cats and what messages might be most persuasive in encouraging cat owners to keep their pet cats indoors and to not abandon an unwanted pet. We also began asking questions about trap-neuter-return (TNR) and the perceived potential effects cats may have on Hawaii's wildlife. Findings of the research include the following:

Outdoor Cats and Their Potential Impact

- Roughly half of the cat owners surveyed allow their pet cats to go outdoors (52 percent), with a large majority of this segment allowing their cat to stay outside for more than a couple of hours (84 percent).
- The most common reason for allowing a pet cat to go outdoors was that cat owners believe that cats have a natural instinct to explore and want to go outdoors (40 percent).
- Only 2 in 5 cat owners surveyed expressed some level of concern about their cats being outdoors (38 percent); their most common concern was that their cat would fight with other cats (36 percent) or be hit by a car (32 percent).
- Seven in eight cat owners surveyed who allow their pet cat to go outdoors indicated that the cat had brought home a wild animal (87 percent), typically birds, bird eggs, and small mammals such as rodents.
- Only 2 in 5 cat owners (38 percent) agreed with the statement that outdoor cats have a negative impact on wild birds in Hawaii; only 7 percent strongly agreed with this statement.

Spaying and Neutering

- Ninety percent of pet cats are spayed or neutered, thanks to the tremendous efforts of local humane societies and cat advocacy groups.
- The most common reasons for not spaying or neutering pet cats were cost (38 percent) and the age of the cat (28 percent).
- In comparison, 39 percent of feral and stray cats fed by cat feeders are spayed or neutered.

Opinions regarding Feral and Stray Cats

- More than 2 in 5 cat owners/feeders (43 percent) believe that feeding stray or feral cats is harmful in some way—the most frequently mentioned reason was that feeding stray or feral cats adds to an overpopulation problem (57 percent).
- Support for non-lethal trap-neuter-return programs for stray and feral cats (85 percent) was significantly higher than that for trap and kill programs (15 percent).

The research also revealed that most people would not admittedly abandon an animal they could no longer care for; anti-abandonment messages such as “pets depend on people, please don't abandon an animal” rated highest in effectiveness as opposed to other messages. Two campaign messages related to the impact of outdoor cats on bird wildlife were ranked among the least effective messages.

Ward Research summarized the study by stating,

Cat owners in Hawaii seem to truly believe that “cats will be cats” and that cats have a natural instinct to explore and to want to go outdoors. As such, many are more than happy to allow their cats to roam around outdoors. While they are afraid of their cat getting into fights with other cats or dogs or getting hit by a car, there currently is very little sympathy among local cat owners for any possible negative effect outdoor cats may have on bird wildlife in Hawaii.

Where do we go from here?

The information gathered from these surveys will be evaluated and used to develop public outreach and education campaigns regarding appropriate cat care in Hawaii and beyond. Creating awareness, and effective messages and strategies to deliver them, are essential. We are committed to working cooperatively with both cat and wildlife advocates recognizing the common goal: safe cats and safe wildlife.

What can you do to help cats and wildlife?

- **Keep your pet cats indoors.** Indoor cats live almost four times longer than outdoor cats, who face illness, injury, being hit by a car, or becoming a victim of cruelty.
- **If you feed don't let them breed.** Management is a key component of a successful TNR program. Management includes spaying and neutering every cat in a colony, treating ill or injured cats and returning healthy feral cats to their territory if safe for cats and wildlife, and removing kittens and friendly cats for adoption. Returning cats to a specific location as part of TNR is for truly unsocialized cats who would otherwise not be adoptable as indoor only pets. When maintaining a colony on someone else's property, it's important that expectations and responsibilities are clear for both the property owner or manager and the cat caretakers. A contract or memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the property owner and caretaker may be helpful.
- **Humanely remove cats who are present in sensitive wildlife areas.** Cats who are left in areas where protected wildlife are present may be subject to removal by government agencies using lethal methods. Identifying sensitive areas, determining if colonies are within them, and working on humane relocation or removal strategies protects both cats and wildlife.
- **Never abandon an animal.** Pets depend on people, and in most states it is a crime to abandon an animal. Pet cats should never be abandoned to fend for themselves. Dumping them into colonies that are designated for unsocialized cats who have already established their territory is equally cruel. Local shelters or rescue groups may be able to provide resources and referrals for pet placement.

Visit www.humanesociety.org/feralcats for more information and resources.