

## Managing Outdoor Cats: Funding Strategies

By John Hadidian, PhD, From WellBeing International ([see the original article here](#))



The ongoing controversy surrounding outdoor cats is a genuine concern for those who care about animal welfare. Although outcries over the impact of cat predation on wildlife, especially birds, were heard as early as the turn of the twentieth century, these worries have become significantly amplified in recent years. Cats have increasingly been labeled as an invasive species contributing to global biodiversity loss. Wildlife advocates highlight the detrimental effects that free-roaming cats can have on any animals small enough to constitute prey and increasingly call for their management through removal. In contrast, cat advocates, fearing this means wholesale killing, recoil from these calls and insist on adopting non-lethal management strategies. Sides are drawn in a way that allows for little dialogue, much less collaboration, despite the irony that both sides have the same goal: reducing the number of cats outdoors.

This polarization creates what social scientists call a “wicked” problem – one that has no technical solution to satisfy the moral and ethical concerns it raises. The nexus of the problem lies in the debate over the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) strategy, which was conceived well over fifty years ago as one means of controlling a growing number of unowned cats. Mostly focused on urban and peri-urban populations, TNR involves the capture and surgical sterilization of unowned cats and their return to their original location. Cat advocates argue that TNR belongs in the “toolkit” as one approach among others that can work to lower outdoor cat numbers. In contrast, wildlife advocates argue it is “scientifically an unsupported and ineffective approach”.

As the sides seem locked in fundamental disagreement about this management approach, it seems reasonable to ask: what is the way forward?

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In a recently published [report](#) commissioned by the Summerlee Foundation, John Boone and Stacy LeBaron take stock of where TNR has been, is now, and could be as one component of what they call a system-based approach to managing free-roaming cats. The report's premise is that, while TNR has successfully prevented numerous births, helped free-roaming cats live healthier, longer lives, and reduced the number of cats entering shelters, it remains an open question as to whether it has yet contributed to any real headway in trying to solve the problem of cat homelessness.

Boone and LeBaron's review and analysis primarily aims to provide perspective and guidance for funding organizations but also contains valuable information for anyone seeking to learn more about outdoor cats. The report presents a roadmap for the next generation of impact-focused management of free-roaming cats, which includes four key elements: integration (through multiple initiatives), targeting (focusing resources), a multi-year duration, and the effective use of information.

These elements are linked to specific goals that involve assessing existing knowledge, articulating the management concepts and tools, implementing integrated and strategic approaches, and conceptualizing a strategic approach. This framework parallels and shares many elements within the evolving field of vertebrate damage management (formerly "vertebrate pest control").

In addressing criticisms raised about TNR, the authors acknowledge that current management is primarily focused on keeping cats out of shelters, and that to a considerable extent, TNR and its ancillary component, Return-to-Field (RTF), are diffuse activities conducted mainly by volunteers and small groups, leaving positive impacts localized. Admittedly, they note, TNR to date functions more as a form of palliative care than as a change agent.

Funders will need to explore new approaches beyond their current granting models to facilitate meaningful change across broader geographies. Studies have now been conducted over a long enough term to demonstrate that reaching and maintaining the critical sterilization threshold prerequisite for population decline can be achieved at scale,<sup>[5]</sup> but the challenges ahead remain significant. These include logistical issues in achieving surgical capacity and dealing with its costs, the reliance on volunteers, the lack of supportive and synergistic programs, difficulties in targeting, the lack of critical information, and competing activities.

As the report notes, we have the building blocks for effective programs—such as capture technology and strategy, veterinary procedures, stakeholder engagement and the ability to educate the public. The key challenge for funders then becomes how effectively to assemble those blocks.

This is no less daunting than the challenges facing the alternative cat management approaches proposed by others where the consensus voice argues that cats should be declared an invasive species and a global threat to biodiversity as a first step to trigger management at a national level comparable to that of other invasive species. In addition, there are calls for better-enforced abandonment laws, the banning (with enforcement) of outdoor feeding and "better accountability" from funding agencies.

This punitive approach is countered by an assistive model now arising from the veterinary and animal care communities, as exemplified throughout the Summerlee Report. In another instance of concordance, both sides agree that public engagement is the key to a better future for cats and wildlife. That future begins with and depends on responsible cat ownership, which is where real progress on the issue of outdoor cats will be made.