

Cozy Condos for Feral Felines

At about half of all domestic cats [1], feral cats pose a large (and largely ignored) question to countless communities around the world. In the US alone, there are more than 70 million feral cats [2], many of whom face harsh climates and unwelcoming residents. These felines were either born in the wild or abandoned by their owners, and without a safe home, they have nowhere to go when the weather gets cold or they are threatened by other animals. In addition, the lack of medical treatment and sterilization can lead to overcrowded and unhealthy feral cat colonies that present a hardship to both the animals and the humans involved.

As a result, past population control techniques have been unnecessarily harsh, often resulting in destruction of feral cats. For example, the Australian government recently passed legislation aiming to kill 2 million cats—using tactics ranging from poison traps to tracker dogs—in an effort to reduce feral cats’ environmental impact. [3] Not only is killing healthy animals inhumane, it’s also ineffective at combatting overpopulation.

According to research compiled by Alley Cat Allies, the “vacuum effect” ensures that whenever cats are removed from an area, neighboring cats and other predators come to fill the void, returning the population to its previous level. [4] This constant cycle of predation can be harmful to the surrounding ecosystem, as it damages populations of prey species. However, it isn’t the feral cats trying to find food

who are at fault, but rather the humans that introduced them to these environments in the first



place. Humans pose an additional risk to feral cat populations through their use of antifreeze and road salt (which are poisonous to cats, and kill many pets each winter) [5] and by using cars. The warm engine of a car can attract cats, who crawl under the tire well to seek shelter. Unfortunately, if the car is turned on, this can cause grave injury to the cat. [6] In addition, frequent food shortages, disease, attacks by dogs and wild animals, and frostbite all contribute to an incredibly high death toll for these felines. On average, feral cats live for about 6 years—assuming they survive past infancy—whereas a domestic indoor cat averages 17 years: nearly three times as long! [7]



With these issues in mind, I started my Girl Scout Gold Award project with the intention of helping these often-forgotten cats. I'd realized that, unlike my own two cats, these strays did not have the fortune of being adopted into a family home and had no one to take care of them. After meeting with a Trap-Neuter-Release advocate, I developed a plan to build portable insulated shelters to place around Baltimore City. These shelters have a dual purpose—not only do they protect the cats from the elements and from other animals, they also provide TNR workers with easy access to the cats, so that they can be identified and given proper medical care. The TNR groups provide a more humane and effective alternative to euthanasia, as they simply sterilize the cats and release them back into the wild, so that they can continue to live their lives without the risk of overpopulation. As a result, the cats don't have to compete



for resources, and aren't as much of a drain on the local ecosystem—a win for cats, prey animals, and humans.

To ensure that the shelters would be able to adequately protect the cats from their environment, I added a layer of insulation to the plastic, installed a windbreaker and bedding, and elevated the shelters off the ground to prevent heat loss. Baltimore city suffers from both scorching summers and freezing winters, so the insulation was an integral component protecting the cats, staving off heatstroke or frostbite depending on the season. After engineering the shelters, I worked with several troops of Girl Scouts, community members, and people at my school to gather recyclable building materials and construct the shelters. This also gave me an opportunity to educate others about the hardships feral cats face and how people can help—whether it's by tapping the hood of your car before you drive, learning proper storage of antifreeze, or by using pet-safe salt.

Over the course of a year, I succeeded in building 15 shelters, which were delivered to the city this winter and placed in the spots where they were needed most, near the highest populated cat colonies. Throughout the coming years, these shelters will not only ease the short-term sufferings of these cats, but also provide for their future, by enabling them to build healthy and controlled colonies. Additionally, I hope that my project will inspire more people to build shelters in their own communities and to lend a sympathetic hand to the animals who so desperately need it, so that one day we may see all cats placed in safe and healthy homes.

Citations:

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Photos:

1. <http://www.vmcfortmill.com/tag/feral-cats/>
2. <http://www.mnn.com/family/pets/stories/22-cats-appreciate-snow>
3. Photo taken by TNR volunteer
4. Personal Photo