

Does neutering feral cats work? Prove it

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Our View: "Trap, Neuter, Return" programs may be humane. But they don't fully address residents' concerns.



(Photo: Ryan Van Velzer/The Republic)

Valley animal-welfare groups, including Maricopa County Animal Control, rely on a form of feral-cat control known as "Trap, Neuter, Return," or TNR.

TNR seems to work fairly well for some interest groups: cat lovers and feral cats.

Yes, the felines experience the trauma of neutering. But their health and welfare are the top priority of TNR programs, which return them to their cat colonies in neighborhoods where they tend to thrive.

One "interest group" that decidedly does not fare well, however, are people forced to endure cat colonies in their neighborhood.

A recent TNR cat roundup, for instance, [removed 37 cats from the Glendale home](http://story/news/local/phoenix/2015/01/28/phoenix-arizona-trap-neuter-return-feral-cats/22364253/) of a woman who feeds the feral animals morning and night. She will resume feeding them morning and night when they return from neutering. But they will not stay in her yard.

The welfare of Glendale and other Valley residents living, unwillingly and unhappily, among feral cat colonies is not at the top of anyone's list in the feral cat equation.

Phoenix's TNR program:

The cats use their yards as litter boxes. They howl and fight in their backyards and nearby alleys through the night. They kill birds and lizards by the thousands. Cats do not cut back on their bird-hunting just because they are well fed.

With TNR programs, the calculation is that, eventually, feral cat populations will decrease. And while some contend they are seeing fewer kittens being turned into shelters since TNR programs started around 2008, the evidence of success is thin.

An estimated 250,000 feral cats roam the neighborhoods of the Valley, and, as the humans of *Jurassic Park* discovered to their dismay, "life finds a way." There will never be a shortage of careless, thoughtless cat owners who simply leave their former pets to the urban wilds. And, so, there will be even more feral cats.

Trap Neuter Return program in Phoenix

Fullscreen

Independent research of the efficacy of TNR programs is scarce, but one [rigorous analysis from Australia](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/key/Feralcatsdotrapneuterreturnprogramsworkbrief182014/%24File/Feral+cats+do+trap+) (<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/key/Feralcatsdotrapneuterreturnprogramsworkbrief182014/%24File/Feral+cats+do+trap+>) where predatory feral cats are a huge, destructive problem, indicates the programs are not nearly as successful as advocates suggest.

The biggest problem? Keeping newcomer, unneutered cats out of local colonies.

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MORE: [Stopping feral cats? It's no easy solution](http://archive.azcentral.com/community/phoenix/articles/2009/07/31/20090731feralcats0801.html) (<http://archive.azcentral.com/community/phoenix/articles/2009/07/31/20090731feralcats0801.html>)

Citing results from Florida as an example, the Australian researchers noted: "Contrary to what was expected, the existing cats did not prevent the new cats from joining the colony and accessing the food supply. Further, even after being provided with a regular supply of food, cats at both TNR programs continued to stalk and kill wildlife."

People who do not live and breathe on behalf of their feline friends must count in these equations. Just a few years ago, a feral cat population at a riparian water ranch in Gilbert [nearly wrecked an attempt to introduce endangered bird species](http://archive.azcentral.com/community/gilbert/articles/20110104gilbert-feral-cats-riparian-preserve-rescue-group-tension.html) (<http://archive.azcentral.com/community/gilbert/articles/20110104gilbert-feral-cats-riparian-preserve-rescue-group-tension.html>) into the area. The cats preyed on the birds.

"Not only is there a danger to the bird population that's out there, but it has also become a health hazard for people," said Scott Anderson, who was then director of the Riparian Preserve Water Ranch in Gilbert.

"It's gotten to the point that the feral cat colony was managing my programs instead of me managing my programs."

Cat advocates argue passionately for their TNR programs. County animal control representatives stand by it as well.

If that is so, let's see the independent data. If cat lovers must insist that residents turn over their yards and parks to feral cats, even neutered feral cats, then they owe it to those residents to prove what they claim about declining cat populations is accurate.

So far, we're not seeing it, and that is grossly unfair to the people forced to endure the litter-box stink and decimated bird and lizard population.

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