

Study Urges Government Help to Control Nation's Cat Population

Communities must cooperate to manage free-roaming cats, study finds.

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Managing outdoor cat populations requires a community-based approach, according to the author of a new study. Managing the nation's "tremendous" cat population requires a community-based approach that includes the involvement of shelter groups, local government, the veterinary community and cat owners, said Linda Lord, author of a recent study to gauge Ohioans' attitudes about free-roaming cats.

The research suggests that public opinion about outdoor cats varies widely across the state.

The Ohio State University survey shows that 40 percent of cat owners allow their cats go outside. Nearly half of the respondents support the idea of laws to ban owners from allowing cats to roam outside, and nearly as many say local governments should make it a priority to control free-roaming cats.

"A lot of attitudes here are fairly typical of those in many parts of the country," Lord said.

Across Ohio, 703 households took part in the 51-question telephone survey of a representative sample of adults. Almost two out of three people indicated they like or love cats, while the others either don't care about cats or dislike them.

Lord, assistant professor of veterinary preventive medicine at Ohio State, said that what concerns her most about the findings is the number of households feeding free-roaming cats. Twenty-six percent of households indicated they feed cats, and a quarter of those did so on a daily basis.

Of those households, fewer than one in four had the cats examined by a veterinarian. In addition, they were aware that the cats delivered at least one litter in the past year. Few knew of trap-neuter-return programs in the area.

"We put all that together, and it's no wonder we're continuing to lose the battle," Lord said. "It's a question of recognizing that this is a huge animal welfare issue."

Working toward a solution, she said, requires cat owners to think long and hard about allowing their cats outside. It's also important for cats to wear identification tags, she said, regardless of whether they are indoor or outdoor pets.

The survey revealed that many cat owners don't believe indoor cats need identification or vaccinations. There is no guarantee that indoor cats will not get lost, Lord said, because they can get out, and then someone else might start feeding them, which adds to the cycle.

When feeding a stray cat, the next responsible step to take, she said, is to get the animal to a veterinarian. That's where the help of local agencies is key, she said, for making broad programs available in communities to eliminate or reduce part of the financial burden involved in caring for animals.

The survey indicated wide support for the use of tax dollars to subsidize such programs, including spay-neuter laws. Lord urges cat owners to seek out existing programs in their community, and if they find that none are in place, she said, "Generate conversations with other cat lovers."

The research is published in the April 15 issue of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. Lord's research was supported by the Kenneth A. Scott Charitable Trust.