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POSITION STATEMENT ON KEEPING CATS INDOORS

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Michigan Audubon supports and encourages further efforts to keep cats indoors in order to protect birds and native wildlife, to promote the safety and well-being of domesticated cats, and to promote human health and ecological balance.

Conservation Conflict

In the past half century, since 1970, nearly 3 billion birds have been lost. That is one in every four birds. This enormous decline in bird populations has many causal factors, including loss and degradation of habitat. A major factor in annual losses of birds is direct predation by cats. **Free-ranging domestic cats kill an estimated 2.4 billion birds and 12.3 billion mammals each year in North America².**

Domestic cats are not native to North America. Introduced by people moving around the world and settling in new locales with cats as intended or unintended traveling companions, cats have spread globally and have directly contributed to the extinction of 33 species¹. Like non-native invasive plants or insects, cats cause serious degradation to native habitats and species within. **Cats are included on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's global worst invasive species list³.**

Public knowledge about the loss of native biodiversity worldwide is improving, as is the acknowledgement that free-roaming cats are one of the leading causes of this devastation. In response, many major conservation organizations have taken a stance against re-releasing outdoor cats back into their 'original' environments, including the American Ornithologists' Union, the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, The Wildlife Society, and the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association.

Public Health

The number one carrier of rabies among domestic animals is the domestic cat, and people are more likely to be exposed to rabies by cats than by wildlife such as raccoons⁴. Rabies exposure is treatable, but the disease is dangerous and treatment costly.

Cats are the only known reproductive host for the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite, which causes toxoplasmosis. The eggs of this parasite are excreted in cat feces, and humans may be exposed to this through accidental inhalation or ingestion - cats may defecate in gardens, sandboxes, or other areas people may come into contact. Toxoplasmosis has serious impacts for humans, including possible miscarriage, blindness, birth defects or developmental problems, memory loss, or death⁵.

Trap Neuter Release: Ineffective and Unsafe

Though still widely employed as a method to control feral cat populations, trap, neuter, release (TNR) programs continue to fail to reduce feral cat populations. The ongoing and global free-ranging cat debate is highly controversial, and has been for decades. The premise of TNR is to capture unowned cats (e.g., feral cats), neuter or spay, and re-release into the environment, with the long-term goal of reducing cat populations in a given area. Unfortunately, this has been shown time and again to be an unsuccessful system, with long-term TNR programs demonstrating that feral cat populations are not reduced in size over time⁷.

Cats, though they may be vaccinated as part of a TNR program, continue to be exposed to and spread disease after a vaccine has expired (many vaccines must be administered annually or bi-annually to maintain efficacy). Cats subjected to these programs are still at risk of injury and infection and may lack proper shelter or food.

Focus on Birds

Global bird populations are experiencing dramatic declines in population due to human-related factors, with nearly one-third of all birds lost since 1970¹. As bird populations continue to plummet, it becomes ever more critical to do everything we can to protect the integrity of ecosystems and habitats, and the birds and wildlife therein. Keeping cats indoors will not only make a positive difference in a cat's life, but will make a tremendous positive impact to saving birds. Cat predation of birds is the most impactful, human-caused, direct threat to birds in North America².

Even when well-fed by people, feral cats and free-roaming indoor/outdoor cats continue to predate wildlife and birds. Cats are predators and follow their instincts even when not facing hunger. The mere presence of a cat in the vicinity of nesting birds can diminish nesting success by causing adult birds to reduce feeding of their nestlings⁹. As mentioned above, cats are carriers of diseases (rabies, toxoplasmosis, and other diseases), and can transmit these diseases to wildlife — an indirect effect on wildlife populations (i.e., not direct mortality), but impactful nonetheless.

References

¹ Rosenberg et al. (2019). Decline of the North American avifauna. *Science* 366:120–124.

² Loss et al. (2013). The impact of free-ranging domestic cats on wildlife of the United States. *Nature Communications* 4:1396.

³ Global Invasive Species Database (2019). http://www.iucngisd.org/gisd/100_worst.php.

⁴ American Bird Conservancy (2019). Cats and diseases.

<https://abcbirds.org/program/cats-indoors/cats-and-diseases/>.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (no date). Neglected parasitic infections in the United States: toxoplasmosis. https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/npi/resources/npi_toxoplasmosis_18.pdf.

⁶ Roth (2018). 'Kitty litter' parasite is wiping out one of Earth's rarest seals.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2018/07/seals-endangered-species-health-disease-oceans/#close>.

⁷ American Bird Conservancy (2019). Cats indoors: trap, neuter, release.

<https://abcbirds.org/program/cats-indoors/trap-neuter-release/>.

⁸ Castillo and Clarke (2003). Trap/Neuter/Release methods ineffective in controlling domestic cat "colonies" on public lands. *Natural Areas Journal* 23:247-253.

⁹ American Bird Conservancy (2019). Press releases: study documents dramatic new impacts to birds from outdoor cats.

<https://abcbirds.org/article/study-documents-dramatic-new-impacts-to-birds-from-outdoor-cats/>