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How the Toronto Humane Society's feral cat colonies help manage outdoor cats

Toronto Humane Society's Barn Cat program helps manage feral cat, though some say the program lacks guidelines.



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Releasing cats into the wild is part of a debate fraught with controversy on the roaming cats' effect on wildlife and whether they all really belong outside.

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Standing in the back of a building's off-loading station in a Caledon industrial park, Lorena Rossi and Francesca Cicca de Marco blow kisses at two cats sitting warily on the other side of a fence.

Teddy and Cheddar are half of one of the feral cat colonies Rossi takes care of. It's a way of managing the seemingly ever-growing and roaming outdoor cat populations. By setting up feeding stations and small insulated shelters, the pair says, the territorial cats establish a colony.

They don't reproduce, either. Rossi's feral cat colonies in Caledon are part of "trap, neuter, return" (TNR) programs, which the City of Toronto has endorsed. Businesses in the industrial parks call Rossi to have cats that have found shelter in their yards spayed and neutered, making their presence more manageable.

Since 2010, Animal Services has taken up spaying and neutering the feral cats brought to its shelters by those who have registered a feral cat colony.

The Toronto Humane Society also supports TNR programs and has its own in the form of its Barn Cat Program, started in 2009. It connects unadoptable cats with farmers who would like barn cats to help manage the rodents on their property.

But releasing cats into the wild is part of a debate fraught with controversy on the roaming cats' effect on wildlife and whether they all really belong outside.

"Birds and small mammals, generally speaking, the world over, are impacted by free roaming cats," says Nathalie Karvonen, executive director of the Toronto Wildlife Centre. Ideally, pet cats should remain indoors, Karvonen explained, because of their propensity to hunt for sport. "It's a really hard, philosophical question to answer," she added, acknowledging the feral cat population is hard to manage because most are difficult to place in homes.



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Lorena Rossi tends to a feeding station at a Caledon cat colony.

Rossi and Cicca de Marco believe the best way to control feral cat populations is through attrition.

So do the humane society and Toronto Animal Services, which say their shelters are less full since their respective TNR programs.

"We know that keeping feral cats in the shelter for any period of time is really difficult for them. They're more stressed; they're more likely to get sick," said Barbara Steinhoff, executive director of the THS.

The only other solution, according to Animal Services program manager Mary Lou Leiher, would be to euthanize those cats.

"We weren't making a dint in the feral cat population. It wasn't solving the problem at all," she said. "Not only that, it wasn't a humane solution for the cats."

One group — some of whom are members of the Toronto Humane Society — has been waging a campaign against THS's Barn Cat Program. It's not so much the birds or mammals they're worried about, it's the cats.

The group has staged protests and a [Change.org petition](#) calling for Steinhoff and the Society's CEO Jacques Messier to resign over the Barn Cat Program, which garnered 1,260 signatures.

Started after the Durham Humane Society's management was handed over in 2014 to THS and a number of its cats were transferred to colonies, the group alleges cats that didn't have the capacity to live outside got into that mix.

"There's no oversight, there's no transparency and there's no accountability," Roxanne St. Germain said in Dianne Fil's living room, with two other supporters of the cause, over tea and crudités. Both say cats left outdoors fall prey to native predators like coyotes, cars, bad weather and infections. "Cats are just as important as other animals in the province, and they shouldn't be dumped (outside)," Fil added.

In response to complaints, last year, THS implemented policies surrounding its program. They include a formal checklist to determine whether a cat is fit for a barn setting and one for the barn itself. Before the cats taken in can be back on the prowl, they are to remain in an enclosed space in the barn for a couple weeks to "get used to the environment," Steinhoff said.

She added that most of those were already followed, but the society decided to "put something formal in place so there's no question about what we're doing."

Kate Martin and Fred Hayes of Martinwoods Farm, a horse farm in Caledon, estimate they've taken in about 20 stray cats from various animal associations, most of which hide out in a storage barn.

"Livestock and cats get along phenomenally," Hayes said inside one of his horse barns, as Enrique, a large beige cat hopped from stall to stall, snuggling up to the horses. "We stock a lot of feed in these barns — the cats, without them, the mice would be eating the bags open, and it would just be a nightmare here."

Back at the industrial park, Rossi and Cicca de Marco point to Teddy and Cheddar's size and apparent health.

When asked what makes humans so passionate about animals – birds, small mammals or cats – Rossi's answer is simple. "It's our need to nurture."