

Report: Feral Cats Threaten Endangered Species

With 4 million to 6 million unwanted animals — mostly cats — put to sleep each year in the United States, some people might consider it more humane to free the felines into the wild.

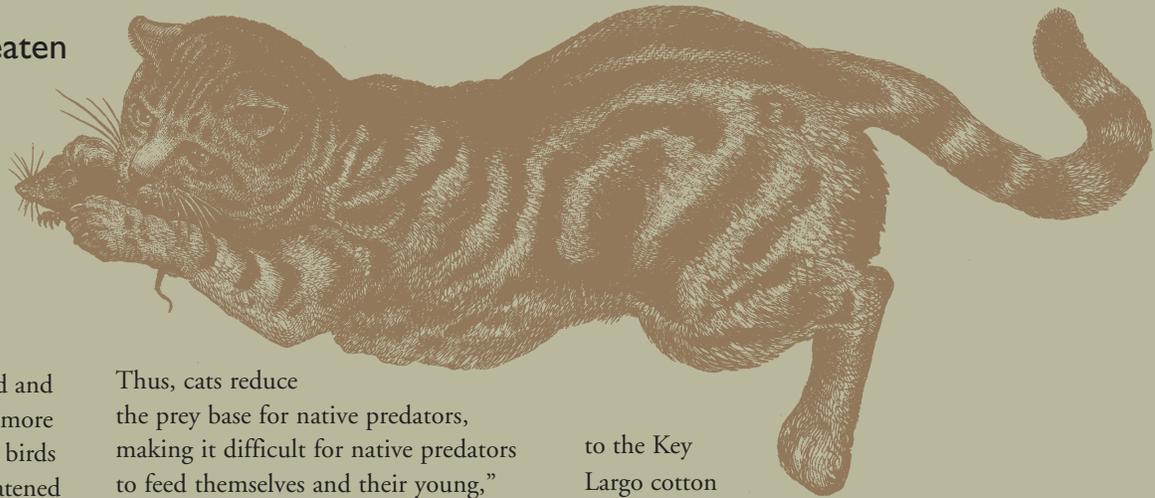
But as these cats forage for food and establish their territories, they kill more than a billion small mammals and birds each year, many of which are threatened or endangered, a University of Florida study shows.

Feral, or free-roaming, untamed cats pose a serious threat to endangered species nationwide as colonies of the wild cats have grown, largely because local groups provide funding and resources to sustain them, according to the UF study commissioned by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, (USFWS).

In addition, although the study found those who release cats into the wild or support feral cat colonies are violating numerous federal and state wildlife protection laws, enforcement of the law in these cases has largely been ignored, according to the study presented in March at the Ninth Annual Public Interest Environmental Conference.

“The domestic cat species is not indigenous to Florida or anywhere else in North America. They impact native wildlife in three primary ways: predation, competition and disease,” said Pamela Hatley, a law student at UF’s Levin College of Law who conducted the study. The results were published in the spring volume of the *Journal of Land Use & Environmental Law*.

“Cats are non-indigenous predators that compete in the wild with native predators like owls, hawks, fox because cats, being subsidized by humans, outnumber these native predators and prey on the same small mammals and birds.



Thus, cats reduce the prey base for native predators, making it difficult for native predators to feed themselves and their young,” she said.

In addition, these cats spread diseases — rabies in particular — that can kill wildlife. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that rabies is more than twice as common in cats as it is in dogs or cattle, and cats have the highest incidence of rabies among domestic species, she said.

The number of feral cats in the United States is estimated to be 40 million to 60 million, said Hatley, who works with the university’s Conservation Clinic, which was commissioned by the USFWS to determine the applicability of federal, state and local wildlife laws to the practice of releasing cats into the wild and maintaining feral cat colonies. Compounding the problem is that another 40 million domestic cats nationwide also roam outside, hunting and killing small animals.

For example, the Lower Florida Keys marsh rabbit is a federally endangered species with a remaining population of about 100 to 300. A 1999 study found free-roaming cats were responsible for 53 percent of the deaths of these rabbits in one year, and a 2002 study indicated the species could be extinct within two or three decades, Hatley said.

Cats also have been recognized as instinctive predators and a serious threat

to the Key Largo cotton mouse, Key Largo woodrat, Choctawhatchee beach mouse, Perdido Key beach mouse, green sea turtle, roseate tern, least tern and Florida scrub-jay, she said.

Cat predation also is a serious problem in California and Hawaii, where, like Florida, the climate is ideal for cats to survive outside and breed year-round. As a result, endangered animals, such as the Hawaiian goose, California brown pelican and blunt-nosed leopard lizard also face additional threats.

“There are some 15 million cats in Florida that spend all or part of their time outside preying on wildlife,” Hatley said. “It is estimated that cats kill as many as 271 million small mammals and 68 million birds each year in Florida, many of these members of threatened and endangered species.”

Although releasing cats into the wild and supporting feral cat colonies is a violation of federal laws, such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Endangered Species Act, enforcement of these and other state and local regulations with the same goals is rare against those who release cats or support feral colonies, she said.

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