



THE CAT FANCIERS' ASSOCIATION, INC.

World's Largest Registry of Pedigreed Cats

ADVOCACY IN ACTION
"CAT LEASH LAWS"
Is the cure worse than the disease?

From the beginning of civilization, cats and humans have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Unlike the dog, which was domesticated by early humans, cats were never fully tamed. Instead cats learned to hunt near human settlements in search of food. This relationship had mutual advantages for both species and it continued. Even today cats are often perceived in our culture as free spirits and only partly domesticated. Many people believe that cats need to roam outside and should not be confined. A significant number of cat owners allow their cats outdoors at least part of the time¹. But other people believe that laws should regulate cats at large (commonly called leash laws) in the same manner that dogs are regulated. They believe in leash laws or other regulations mandating confinement of cats. Others go even further and combine mandatory confinement with trap-and-kill programs to eliminate outdoor cats. These people claim this will protect native birds and other animals and solve what is perceived as a "nuisance."

In the 19th century free roaming dogs were a menace to people and livestock. The threat of rabies presented a significant public health threat. Laws were passed requiring the licensing and often confinement of dogs. Other laws were passed to allow farmers and others to kill dogs preying on their livestock and allowing impoundment of dogs at large. As the country became more urban, concerns attributable to the nuisance of dogs straying led to more such "leash laws" and stricter enforcement. It was inevitable that some lawmakers suggested that leash laws be extended to include cats.

Cats are not small dogs. Leashing cats presents physiological challenges not present with dogs. Cats are generally much more agile and better climbers than dogs. Many cat owners prefer to use "break away" collars to avoid entangling on branches and strangling the cat. But break away collars can be lost or removed. Many cat owners prefer microchipping or other permanent identification in addition to any visible tags or collars. Neither conventional collars or break away collars are suitable for walking a cat on leash. Cat harnesses specifically designed for walking a cat should be used. And the harness must fit the cat well and be fastened correctly or the cat may slip out of the harness. Offering the opportunity to walk on a leash, or travel in a cart designed for cats, may help enrich and expand a cats' life. Many cats may be easily persuaded to walk on a leash -- but for others it will be a considerable challenge.

Despite these obvious differences, some jurisdictions have enacted, or are considering, cat leash laws. These cat confinement laws may be proposed as solutions to perceived nuisance or to stop bird hunting by cats. The City of New Orleans has an "animal confinement law" which requires that all pets be chained or confined with specific exceptions. Cats who are spayed/neutered, as well as licensed, vaccinated and tagged, may be allowed outside but can not leave the owners' property. Any cat collected at large can not be returned to its owner until spayed or neutered². If your cat is caught off your property and not leashed you may be fined up to \$500 or serve 6 months in jail or community service or all three³.

Cat leash laws can be extremely threatening to cat owners and devastating for innocent cats. What happens to owned cats caught outdoors? If lucky, they may be returned to their owners (perhaps together with a fine or other penalty). But animal shelters report that only a tiny percentage of cats are returned to

their owners. If a cat unintentionally escapes from his home while his owners are on vacation and is not wearing his collar and tag this could be a death sentence. Lost in the leash law debate are the free-roaming/feral cats who have no owners. Unless sufficiently socialized for adoption these cats will be killed. Often it is difficult to determine if a cat is truly feral or a pet who has never been outside and is frightened in the strange shelter environment.

The ultimate penalty for cats caught off leash was proposed in Wisconsin in early 2005. A statewide proposal (known as question 62) would have defined free-roaming cats with no obvious signs of ownership as an "unprotected species." As an unprotected species, along with other nuisance species as rats, mice, skunks, opossums and weasels; free-roaming cats could be hunted and killed at any time with no bag limit. The idea of shooting outdoor cats on sight set off an avalanche of criticism from across the nation and the Wisconsin proposal failed. But some organizations and individuals still believe that killing outdoor cats not confined to the owner's property or on leash is best⁴.

Why such hatred for free-roaming outdoor cats? While no one has reported seeing a cat take down livestock, such as horses and cattle, cats are accused of destroying wildlife. Groups such as the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) state that "... cats kill hundreds of millions of birds, and more than a billion small mammals, such as rabbits, squirrels, and chipmunks, each year⁵." But do they?

Many of those who favor "round up and kill" solutions for outdoor cats rely on a debunked Wisconsin study that estimated that: "...free-ranging domestic cats in Wisconsin may be killing between 8 and 217 million birds each year. The most reasonable estimates indicate that 39 million birds are killed in the state each year⁶." However, the source for these "facts" was identified in the footnote as taken from a previous work by the same authors. Subsequent analysis of the claims showed that the previous work had not relied on any studies either. This led to the admission by the authors that: "Those figures were from our proposal. ***They aren't actual data***; that was just our projection to show how bad it might be⁷." Yet groups like the ABC continue to cite the Wisconsin study as well as other debunked "facts" as authoritative⁸. It is hard for cat lovers or animal lovers in general, to understand this mind-set.

Fortunately, this "round up and kill" attitude toward free-roaming cats is not a view shared by most. A 2007 study showed that: "... an overwhelming majority of Americans—81%—believes that leaving a stray cat outside to live out his life is more humane than having the cat caught and killed⁹. Even if the stray cat were certain to die in two years being struck by a car, the overwhelming majority of Americans, 71%, would still prefer to let the cat live¹⁰.

CFA and many animal welfare organizations advocate an approach that will gradually convince cat owners that their cats are safer indoors or confined and to help them understand that cats can adapt to a stimulating and enriched indoor or enclosed outdoor environment. Cats are self-sufficient creatures more than capable of amusing themselves for short periods alone. However cats also need stimulation, challenges and inter-active play time with their owners.

Confinement laws reinforce negative attitudes that cats are nuisance pests without value and polarize communities. At special risk are homeless cats. Programs to trap/neuter/return (TNR) feral cats have been successful in stopping reproduction of unowned cats. This may become impossible when a general confinement law is passed. These laws do not benefit society, the shelters or the cats.

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¹ According to one American Pet Products Manufacturing Association (APPMA) 2006 National Pet Owners' Survey, 36% of cat owners allow their cats outside for a portion of the time.

² New Orleans City Ordinance, Chapter 18 ANIMALS, ARTICLE I. IN GENERAL, Sec. 18-14. Animals to be confined, exceptions.

³ New Orleans City Ordinance, Chapter 18 ANIMALS, ARTICLE I. IN GENERAL, Sec. 18-18. Civil adjudication; misdemeanors.

⁴ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Euthanasia: The Compassionate Option,

<http://www.helpinganimals.com/Factsheet/files/FactsheetDisplay.asp?ID=39>

American Bird Conservancy - TNR Reality Check <http://www.tnrrealitycheck.com/basicInfo.asp>

⁵ <http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/materials/predation.pdf>

⁶ Cats and Wildlife - A Conservation Dilemma, By John S. Coleman, Stanley A. Temple and Scott R. Craven

⁷ http://www.straypetadvocacy.org/html/wisconsin_study.html

⁸ For a general criticism of the American Bird Conservancy figures, see generally:

Redemption - The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America, by Nathan Winograd, p 76-79.

TNR-Past Present and Future, by Ellen Perry Berkeley, p18-24.

Feral Cat Predation and Its Effects on Wildlife-Searching For the Truth, by Christine L. O'Keefe, Ph.D.

http://www.straypetadvocacy.org/html/predation_studies_reviewed.html

⁹ Alley Cat Allies, U.S. Public Opinion on Humane Treatment of Stray Cats, September 2007, page 1,

<http://www.kintera.org/TR.asp?a=aqLHIWNALhIUK9J&s=jkISK6OKJfIYI9MWH&m=kwJWKeP3KqIbH>

¹⁰ Id at page 2.