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Insights From 20 Years' Research on Free-Roaming Cats

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The domestic cat had been distributed around the globe mainly as a pet. Over the years, it formed non-domiciliary populations known as free-roaming cats. Free-roaming cats often suffer from impaired welfare and were shown to cause adverse environmental effects, such as ecological damage, nuisances, and public health hazards. The management of these populations is implemented mainly by the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) method, as it is considered as a humane control method. Despite the extensive use of this method, there is disagreement among researchers, regulators, and animal organizations, in regard to the effectiveness of this method in reducing free-roaming cat numbers, improving their welfare, and reducing the environmental adverse effects they might cause. In our research, we examined few aspects of TNR effectiveness, along with the performance of a uniquely designed controlled field experiment, over a 12-years period and spanning a 20-km2 urban area. We found positive correlation between neutering and cat health and survival. High intensity-TNR reversed population growth, reaching an annual approximately 7% reduction, only when it was applied in geographic contiguity. This population reduction was limited by a rebound increase in cat reproduction and longevity. We conclude that cat population management by TNR should be performed with high intensity, continuously, and in geographic contiguity to enable population reduction. To enhance management effectiveness and mitigate compensatory effects, we recommend further evaluating an integrated strategy that combines TNR with complementary methods (e.g., vital resource regulation, ill cat euthanasia, and adoption).

Recent Publications

1. Gunther I., Hawlena H., Azriel L., Gibor D., Berke O., and Klement E., 2022. "Reduction of free-roaming cat population requires high-intensity neutering in spatial contiguity to mitigate compensatory effects". Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, vol. 119(15): 1-10.

2. Gunther I., Azriel L., Wolf H., Raz T., Klement E., 2020. "An accessible scheme for monitoring free-roaming cat population trends". Ecology and Evolution 10:1288–1298.

3. Gunther I., Raz T., and Klement E., 2018. "Association of neutering with health and welfare of urban free-roaming cat population in Israel, during 2012-2014. Preventive Veterinary Medicine 157 26-33.

Biography

Idit Gunther is a DVM (2004) and PhD graduate (2020) in the Koret School of Veterinary Medicine, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. Her research scope is in the management of free-roaming cat populations. Since 2016, she is serving as the Founder and principal guest Lecturer of the 26-hour academic course of "animal population management" in the Master of Veterinary Public Health program in the Koret school of Veterinary Medicine.

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