

Key points:

- TNR releases compromised animals in the immediate post-operative period
- Life for feral animals is short and hard, and inevitably ends in a bad death

If surgical TNR programs are ineffective at reducing feral cat and dog populations, and promotion of these programs without scientific validity also runs the risk of future euthanasia by wildlife agencies, the ethics of surgically altering a feral animal should be in the back of everyone's mind involved with TNR of unowned animals. This discussion is beyond the scope of this document since it is highly subjective and debatable, but it warrants an entire one page chapter since we are ultimately potentially deciding the fate of billions of animals in the long run. Given that we are effectively playing the hand of God with species that we domesticated and that are now dependent on us, we should at least consider what we are doing when we capture, surgically alter, and release back into the wild a dog or cat that may not always survive the procedure. Specifically, two key questions should at least be asked. What are the immediate effects of TNR on individual animals released back into the wild? What kind of life are we releasing them back into? (34)

TNR programs frequently release post-operative patients back into their original locations within a 24 hour period and no further follow-up is done. Even assuming that the surgical complication rate is low and that only a very small percentage of these animals will experience direct surgical complications (hemoabdomen, peritonitis, etc.), releasing a patient into a feral environment in the immediate postoperative period is not a benign event. At best, many of these animals are at higher risk of predation, being hit-by-car, etc. during this

period. It is a subjective personal decision for each person involved in surgical TNR programs as to whether the perceived benefit of sterilization is worth releasing a compromised animal into the environment at large. Would they want their own personal pet to spend several nights recovering in potentially cold or hot weather, potentially dealing with predators or other feral animals? Would they themselves want to spend their first night after an abdominal surgery outside in the cold? How well can an animal recovering from an anesthetic event maintain its core temperature, defend itself, find food or water, or even be remotely comfortable?

Further, the general approach taken by TNR advocates is that stray cats and dogs live a quality of life that outweighs the option of shelter life (if space is available) or even euthanasia. No scientific data can qualify what life is like for feral domestic animals, and likely there is a very large range depending on proximity to humans, cities, ambient temperatures, and a host of other factors. However, in much of the world, the average lifespan of free-roaming and feral animals is certainly low as compared with their housed counterparts (~2 years for cats, ~2-3 years for dogs) (59, 60, 61), and ultimately ends in a manner that would not be acceptable to pet owners with respect to their own cats and dogs. As one author wrote in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, "Many feral cats live short, brutal lives"(59).

The hard lives and hard deaths suffered by feral animals is sometimes ignored, and other times is simply accepted. The computer modeling paper published in 2019 and cited by TNR advocacy groups to justify "high intensity TNR" defined preventable deaths as "specifically the deaths of kittens under 6 months old....and the deaths of any cats due to lethal management" (52). This paper stated that "we acknowledge that free-roaming cats sometimes die from outdoor hazards (including predation, vehicles and other accidents, starvation, extreme weather, and lack of medical care)". Given the abbreviated lifespan of feral cats and dogs, it is likely that these "outdoor hazards" are the inevitable end for virtually all of these animals not brought to veterinarians for humane euthanasia. As a profession, veterinarians have taken the approach that euthanasia (Greek for "Good death") is

preferable over most "natural" causes of death, and despite TNR advocates' visceral adversity to euthanasia, it is up to each person to decide if a short, potentially hard life with one of the "non preventable" deaths identified above is worth it.