

**Bringing in the Reinforcements: An Argument to Stop Preaching to Cat Owners from Behind Birding Binoculars, and to Recruit Trusted Messengers for a Collaborative Campaign**

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**Issues in Biodiversity**

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**Abstract:** Traditionally, wildlife conservationists have tried to motivate cat owners directly to keep their pet cats indoors with little, to no success. Cat owners have a lack of trust in these sources, suspecting conflicted interests, and that the issues presented are exaggerations. Collaborating with a variety of stakeholders who are also trusted messengers (i.e. veterinarians, cat shelters, animal welfare and anti-cruelty groups), may prove to be more effective. Employing celebrities and social media influencers, while not likely stakeholders, may also be helpful in regards to marketing campaign messaging.

## **Introduction**

Domestic cat predation is a huge thorn in the side of conservationists. 42.7 million American households have 1 or more cats as pets (“Pet Industry Market Size & Ownership Statistics,” 2019). There have been many public outreach campaigns targeting these cat owners, pleading with them to keep their cats indoors, to mitigate impacts to wildlife. Unfortunately, these campaigns typically fail to gain traction amongst their intended audience. When a cat owner looks at an Audubon society brochure explaining the need to keep their cats inside, that reader will most likely lose interest when the source of the information is identified. “Cat people” don’t want “bird people” telling them what to do with their beloved felines. In some ways, this is understandable. To remedy this, one has to address the need to reconcile perceived conflicted interests. I am theorizing that incorporating a variety of trusted messengers as partners in collaborative campaigns will be more effective than the status quo. This paper is effectively a concept model for future public outreach campaigns promoting responsible cat ownership.

## **Wildlife Conservationists aka “Bird People”**

By compiling already-published research figures, Loss, Will, & Marra (2013) estimate that domestic cats in the contiguous United States kill between 1.3 and 4.0 billion birds per year. 31% (approximately 403 million – 1.24 billion) of these annual bird kills are caused by owned indoor/outdoor pet cats alone. Furthermore, their study estimates that cat-caused annual mammal mortality is between 6.3 and 22.3 billion. 11% (approximately 693 million – 2.453 billion) of these yearly mammalian kills are caused by indoor/outdoor pet cats alone. The ultimate goal of the author’s campaign proposition is to target current and future owners of these indoor/outdoor pet cats in hopes of bringing down these staggering statistics.

People who regularly bring food to feral cat colonies, or owners of outdoor pet cats may believe that the felines they care for are unlikely predators that will have little to no impact on the local environment. In fact, despite being well-fed, “hunting and hunger are not linked in domestic cats. Even well-fed cats hunt and kill lizards, small mammals, birds, and insects” (Longcore et al., 2009). Cats do not only impact wild prey populations in terms of direct kills. Scott R. Loss and Peter P. Marra coin the term “fear effects” as behavioral effects and stress responses of cat

predation. These “fear effects” indirectly lead to declines in population growth of prey species. For example, birds who are preyed upon by cats expend energy on alarm calls and other agitation behaviors. Not only does that reduce energy for the birds to defend against other predators, but it may attract attention of other predators to their nests. This may also reduce the normal schedule of visits of parent birds to their nests to feed their young. Outdoor pet cats may also deter backyard birds from feeling safe enough to visit bird feeders (Loss and Marra, 2017). Common predators to ground birds such as Northern Bobwhite Quail, domestic cats have even been attributed to a rise in native tick populations. When species like the Northern Bobwhite are wiped out from wooded areas, levels of their food sources (ticks included) are not managed normally (Bobwhite Quail Study, n.d.).

As discussed in the introduction, negative impacts to wildlife and ecosystem services are what initiated my passion for this proposed campaign for responsible cat ownership. Wildlife conservation groups are traditionally the most vocal in regards to keeping cats indoors. Most similar campaigns come from organizations such as American Bird Conservancy or local Audubon societies. These campaigns are largely unsuccessful and cause cat owners to get defensive and make efforts to minimize cats’ predation. Many cat owners have great distrust for Audubon societies, feeling their reported impacts of cats are being exaggerated. When surveyed, cat owners have time and again expressed dismissal of outdoor risks to and from their cats. As shown in Figure 1 & 2 (see Appendix), this skepticism of risk is not just a trait of American cat owners (McDonald et al., 2015; Woolley & Hartley, 2019). Conservation groups have a role to play in the mistrust. News articles with names such as “Cat Owners Turn Blind Eye to Pets’ Violence,” put out by Audubon, does nothing to help our cause (Cat Owners Turn a Blind Eye to Pets’ Violence, 2015). For this reason, I posit that campaigns for responsible cat ownership (including those with ecological motives) cannot continue to be voiced solely from the conservationist’s corner if they expect to be effective.

### **Medical Professionals: Veterinarians & Doctors**

One of the most powerful messengers to cat owners are their trusted veterinarians. Veterinarians, like all doctors, are data-driven and their stances are based in science. They are also assumedly

cat lovers, so cat owners are apt to hear out veterinarians' recommendations. Recruiting veterinarians to responsible cat ownership campaigns would likely be extremely advantageous. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)'s official stance on free-roaming, owned cats, "encourages" veterinarians to educate clients and the public about associated risks. It does not, though, require it. In fact, previous edits of their stance included the phrase "strongly encourages" (AVMA, 2016). While it may not seem to be a large discrepancy, it could possibly be a clue to veterinarian concerns about losing clientele. Hopefully, that does not prove veterinarians to be weary to partner in a public outreach campaign such as this. The AVMA points out risks such as reduced life span, exposure to injury, car-related deaths, human-caused cruelty, increased exposure to parasites and zoonotic disease, and extreme weather conditions (Free-Roaming, Owned Cats, n.d.). Veterinary costs for outdoor cats are higher on average than those for indoor cats due to increased risk of injury, disease, poisoning, and infestation.

Outdoor cats are more likely to contract parasites and diseases. Many of these conditions may be transmitted to other pets when the cats return home. Some parasites like *Toxocara cati*, hookworm (*Ancylostoma tubaeforme*), and tapeworm (*Dipylidium caninum*) may also be transmitted to humans in the home. Cats can also transport ticks into the home, along with risks of Lyme disease contraction. Effects of Lyme in humans (such as neurological problems, arthritis, & compromised immunity) are numerous, and often serious or long-lasting. Zoonotic diseases, such as toxoplasmosis (*Toxoplasma gondii*) and cat scratch disease (*Bartonella henselae*) are also concerning. Outdoor cats often contract diseases from infected wildlife, ticks, standing water, soil, and feces of other animals (Lepczyk, Lohr, & Duffy, 2015). Due to risks of parasite and disease transmission from outdoor cats to humans, medical doctors (MD's) may also be sensible campaign messengers to reach out to for partnership. The biggest obstacle to messaging to cat owners about disease concerns is in quantifying risks. There is a lack of large-scale testing for zoonotic disease in cats. Lack of data controls for indoor versus outdoor cats also poses a problem when attempting to use findings to make the case for keeping cats indoors. Human contraction of zoonotic disease is difficult to link (statistically) to cats in a meaningful way due to technological barriers and data sensitivity. Though governmental agencies may choose to share information with one another, their data sets are not automatically

aggregated or able to be disseminated to the general public (Scotch et al., 2011). That being said, it is still worthwhile to provide as much information as possible to cat owners regarding zoonotic disease risks.

Sometimes, just the *suspicion* of a zoonotic disease could prove fatal to cats. Cats that contract rabies suffer serious symptoms and are recommended to be euthanized to end their suffering and for public health concerns. While uncommon, rabies is transmissible from cat to human.

Unfortunately, rabies is tested post-mortem. In 2018, 241 positive rabies test results in domestic cats were reported to the CDC. Sadly though, the remaining **21,523 cats** that tested negative, were also euthanized due to suspicion of the virus (Ma et al., 2020). Had these cats been kept indoors, there would likely be little reason to suspect rabies. Therefore, it is conceivable that a number of these cats may have been euthanized unnecessarily due to risks directly connected to their outdoor access. Examples such as this show that the veterinary impact argument can be made to outdoor cat owners, even when reported infection rates appear low.

### **Cat Shelters/Rescue Organizations/Humane Societies**

One of the most trusted messengers to the cat owner community are from cat shelters and pet rescue organizations. 31% of owned cats were obtained from shelters or humane societies.

(Source: American Pet Products Association 2015-2016 (APPA)). Many cat owners are familiar with the shelters in and around their community and may follow them on social media.

Particularly passionate cat owners volunteer for these organizations and are thereby even more engrossed in their messaging, and naturally become auxiliary messengers themselves to their friends and family. Cat shelters and related organizations often not only provide rescue/surrender and adoption services, but also have programs focused on Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) and feral colony management. While this project focuses on owned cats, rather than feral cats, the large stake that shelters have in feral cat management is actually extremely relevant. As the shelters seek to reduce feral cat colonies, they have great cause to promote spaying and neutering pet cats. Even cats which are kept indoors should be spayed or neutered, in order to prevent any attempts at escaping the home to breed when hormonal. Cat shelters, which often rely on volunteers, are often inundated with cases. Having to stretch their resources too thinly, is a

substantial reason why most TPR programs are not as effective as they intend to be. As discussed in the section of this paper “Veterinarians,” outdoor cats are more exposed to disease and injury. As such, it can be extrapolated that, when cat intake is from abandoned (non-feral) cats found in the community, rather than surrendered directly from an owner, they are more likely to need more veterinary services, spending more precious finite funding. Cat shelters and humane societies can be more effective and take on new projects when responsible cat ownership is practiced. They are valuable messengers to recruit to cat indoors campaigns, both trusted by cat owners, and multiply-motivated to sway their loyal followers.

### **Animal Welfare/Anti-Cruelty Groups**

Surprising allies to the campaign include animal welfare groups such as ASPCA or PETA. These are messengers that may be more readily heard out than others because they are widely known to have the best interests of animals at the heart of their work. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), for example, focuses their work on combating negative impacts to animals caused by humans, when it comes to abuse, neglect, or even in terms of food consumption. PETA has a reputation of being somewhat radical in certain circles, but their commitment to what they believe is right for animals is unquestioned. In regards to responsible cat ownership, PETA vehemently denounces allowing cats to free roam outdoors. The organization often uses provocative language in their messaging. For example, in condemning “trap-neuter-release” (TNR) policies used by many shelters, they rename the practice “trap-neuter-REABANDON.” PETA is concerned with the many hazards to cats outdoors including car accidents, parasites, extreme weather conditions, wounds and injuries (however minor) which may prove grave without immediate veterinary attention. Other PETA concerns regarding free-roaming cats include dehydration or starvation, attacks by dogs or other predatory animals, and even human-caused violence. Interestingly, they don’t specifically name predation to wildlife as a reason to keep cats indoors but they do bring up the subject: “Right or wrong, many property and business owners do not want cats on their property. Not everyone loves cats or wants them climbing on their cars, maiming or killing birds, or digging in their gardens. When animal shelters refuse to accept cats (as more and more so-called “no kill” facilities are doing), property

owners often take matters into their own hands and resort to cruelty, both intentional and unintentional” (Great Outdoors? Not for Cats! (Updated November 2019) | PETA, 2018). This wording is hard to hear, especially as a conservation-minded person like myself. It does play to cat owners’ fears and emotions though, which may be effective. Even though groups like PETA may not seem to be on board with several of the proposed messengers being considered in this paper, allowing their voice to be heard amongst the others can be beneficial for the cause.

### **Celebrities & Social Media Influencers**

There are currently over 180 million American Facebook accounts, about 107 million American Instagram users, and almost 60 million American Twitter users. These figures are continuing to rise each year (Statista, 2020). Social media plays a huge role in the lives of many Americans. For this reason, it is critical for any US-based campaign to use a variety of social media platforms to reach intended audiences. “Social media influencers” are account holders with very large follower bases. Those who follow these “influencers” will see a multitude of their posts, perhaps showing personal moments or viewpoints, or simply posting so frequently that the followers have a false sense of “knowing” and thereby “trusting” them. These “influencers” are often hired by companies to market products to their loyal followers. Social media influencers can also be useful trusted messengers for public outreach campaigns such as this one promoting responsible cat ownership. Celebrities are a subset of social media influencers. Networking with popular celebrities is predictably difficult for most people looking to promote a public outreach campaign. If and when connections to animal-loving celebrities can be made, they should be asked to participate. PETA is well-known for incorporating celebrities in their ads, for example. Smaller campaigns with smaller ranges may look to local celebrities for effective promotion. Social media influencers, including celebrities, are not necessarily stakeholders, as the other categories of trusted messengers have been. Still, they may be motivated (either by money or personal views) to aid in disseminating campaign messages. Social media promotion is especially significant as not only followers will be reached, but when post “sharing” is performed by followers, “non-follower” friends and family are thereby reached as well.

## **Conclusion/ Plans for Future Work**

I intend to develop a collaborative campaign for responsible cat ownership. I am developing a website and once that is live, will create outreach materials like informational brochures with the website address on it. These brochures would have messaging from a variety of partners such as the messengers the author highlighted within this paper. I would like to hold tabling sessions in public areas to reach out to my community. Eventually, I would also like to link a variety of social media platforms for this campaign, such as Instagram and Facebook accounts.

While cat owners often underestimate the risks of letting cats outdoors, like most adult audiences, they are undoubtedly capable of sifting through messaging they receive and assessing sincerity. Whether or not they believe the statistics regarding environmental impacts, providing this information is worthwhile. Ultimately, which message or messenger gets through to the cat owner is unimportant. If the end result is an indoor only cat, the objective has been met, and you have not only satisfied your own goals, but your partners' as well. Even if wildlife conservation groups are not their most trusted messengers, my hope is that through collaboration with alternative messengers, cat owners may begin to take the statistics seriously, or have increased respect for those groups at the very least.

While this paper focused on keeping cats indoors as a measurement for responsible pet ownership (and that is the goal), it is important to mention that incorporating alternative options to owners can help with message reception. If more cat owners feel empowered to choose to build a "catio" enclosure, or walk their cats on leashes, it can be worth including in a campaign for responsible cat ownership. This could appeal to some who would otherwise feel they are being told what to do with limited autonomy and freedom of choice, and ultimately make no behavior changes (Heilman & Garner, 1975). Providing suggestions for physical and mental stimulation and play would also help make the case that cats can have a full and satisfying life indoors. I truly believe that with prescriptive measures to heal the divide between "cat people" and "bird people," trust can be fostered. Simply scolding cat owners from behind our birding binoculars is not enough.



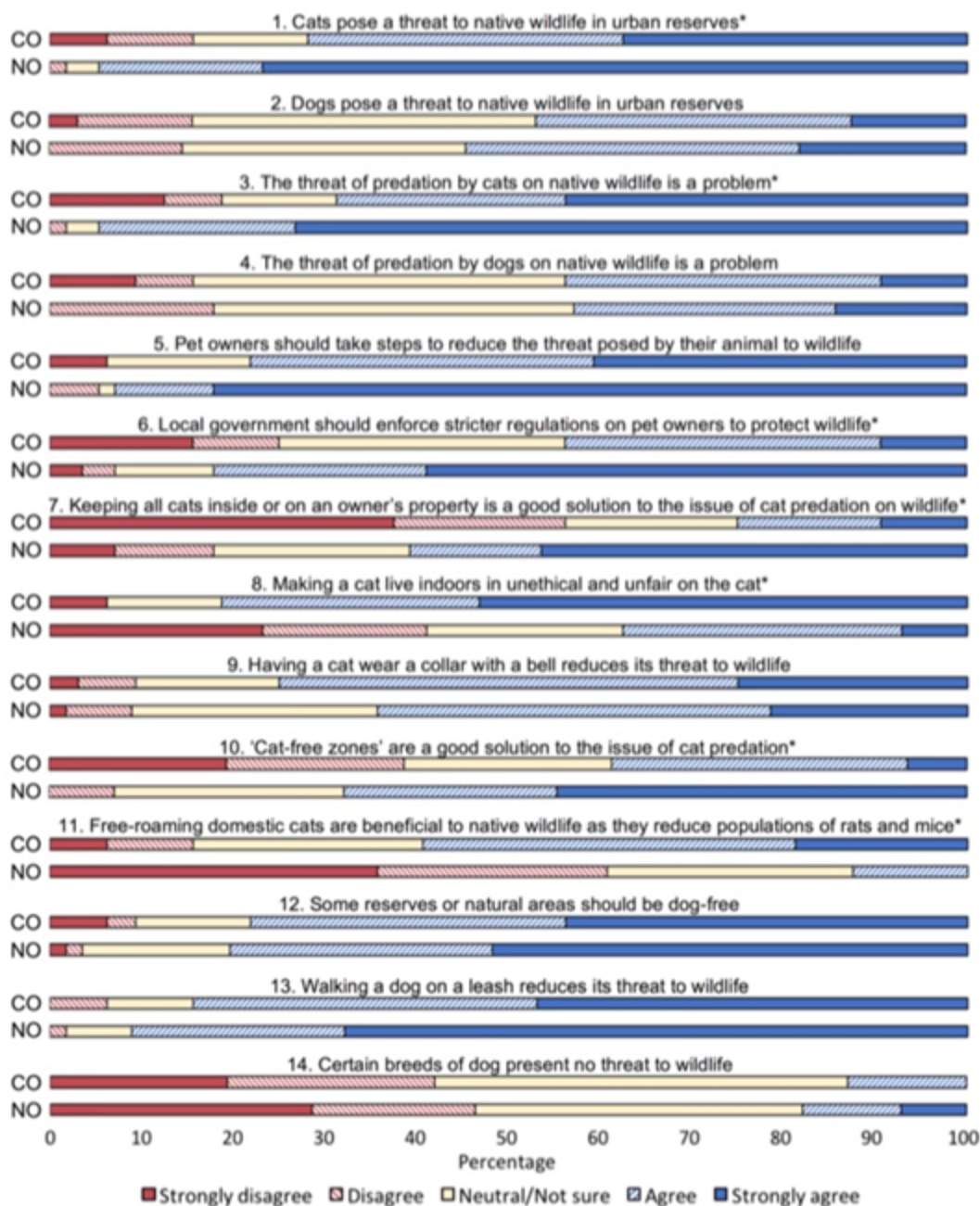
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## APPENDIX

**FIGURE 1: Comparison of attitudes on risk – Cat Owners (CO) vs. Non-owners (NO) from New Zealand Study**



**Fig. 8** Percentage of responses to each level on the Likert scale for the 14 statements (upper = cat owners (CO) and below = non-cat owners (NO)). Asterisks indicate significance ( $p < 0.05$ ).  $n = 88$  for all statements except 2, 10 and 14 for which  $n = 87$

(Source: Woolley & Hartley, 2019).

**APPENDIX (continued)**

**FIGURE 2 – Outdoor Cat Owner Attitudes from UK Study**

**Table 1.** Percentage distribution of owners' responses to domestic cat predation and control in order of agreement from most (1) to least agreeable (5). Note that the majority of respondents disagreed with statements 2–5

Question	Response			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. All cats should be sterilised	11	27	44	18
2. Domestic cats are harmful to wildlife	13	47	33	7
3. I would be happy to keep my cat on my property between sunset/sunrise	20	41	30	9
4. Domestic cats killing wildlife is a serious problem	20	53	22	5
5. I would be happy to keep my cat on my property at all times	46	52	2	0

(Source: McDonald et al., 2015).