

COUNTING CATS: SOME GUIDANCE AND AN EXAMPLE

Margaret R. Slater, DVM, PhD

Senior Director of Veterinary Epidemiology, Shelter Research and Development

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to animals

Why would we want to count free-roaming cats? Oftentimes one wants to know how many cats are there in a given location. We may also want to assess how free-roaming cat populations change over time. Without good data on cat abundance, it will be very difficult to evaluate the success of a given approach on decreasing cat numbers. Finally, funders (within or from outside an organization) are increasingly interested in accountability and documenting exactly how successful their dollars are.

Historically, the monitoring of the health and viability of wildlife populations has been performed using various techniques. Many of these can be adapted to free-roaming cat populations. Population monitoring is a method to estimate the size of a population and how that population changes with time. At its most basic, monitoring of populations consists of counting or estimating the number of cats in a specific geographic area during a particular time period. Tracking other information about the cats such as age, body condition, the presence or absence of ear-tipping or collars and tags can also be performed as part of the monitoring program.

There are some very specific and important principals in designing monitoring programs. There is a document on the ACC&D website which provides much greater detail. One consideration is whether the actual number of cats in a location is necessary or if the need for monitoring can be addressed by just determining if the cat population is stable, growing or declining. A second critical consideration related to what information is needed, is whether a rapid survey method or an intensive survey method or, more likely, a combination is needed. As the name implies, rapid surveys are much less time intensive and can provide a general picture of the population of interest. Intensive surveys provide more accurate counts of cats and more detailed information on how the population is changing, but require the more investment in determining the location and identifying and training staff.

In four neighborhoods in NYC, a combination of rapid and intensive approaches was used to get actual cat counts and document changes in the cat populations' age structure and ear-tipping. We used a combination of walking routes with two observers to count and photograph individual cats (the person who was more familiar with the neighborhood and the cats saw more cats) and motion activated cameras in areas where the walkers' weren't able to go. There was substantial variability in numbers and juvenile/adult between locations and between counts a year apart.