

Indoors Only: That's Where Your Cat Should Be

Telling a cat owner that his or her cat should stay indoors or contained in their yard will often elicit indignant responses such as, "It's only natural for a cat to go out," or "How could I deprive him of so much pleasure?" or "Cats can take care of themselves."

The fact is, none of the above are good reasons, only excuses. Cats allowed to roam at will sometimes pay with their lives, and the NSPCA and other shelters pay millions of Rand each year for animal control services to rescue, treat, feed, and house many of the cats that roam "at large" in the country.

There is nothing "natural" about a cat being outside. When humans domesticated cats (about 6,000 years ago), they removed them from the wild and changed their ecological role. Cats are no longer wild predators that fit into an ecosystem, but are dependent on humans, receiving the things they need to live from people.

Nothing "Natural" About It

Although cats retain their hunting instincts, there is no natural need to them to hunt. True predators in the wild only kill what they will eat, whereas a cat kills for play, not always eating what it catches. The number of wild predators in relation to the number of species is kept in check by numerous natural controls such as weather, availability of food, mates, and other predators. Domestic cats upset the balance. A well-fed house cat doesn't need to hunt to survive, yet cats kill untold numbers of wild animals while being almost wholly unaffected by the natural controls on numbers. One study in a small village in England found that house cats responsible for between one-third to one-half of all house sparrow deaths in that village. This fact becomes even more alarming when you realize that birds were one of the less frequently caught specimens (small mammals led the list).

Wild animals have enough problems surviving against the encroaching human population without having to satisfy the hunting instincts of neighbourhood felines.

Cats Can Cause the Same Problems as Dogs

In addition to inflicting damage to area wildlife, free-roaming cats cause many of the same problems that dogs do. We do not tolerate dogs roaming at large because they can be a nuisance. Cats break into garbage, too, and dig up the neighbours' flower beds, defecate in children's sand boxes, ruin bird watching for people with feeders, and add to the burgeoning cat overpopulation problem. Free-roaming cats also pose a hazard to motorists who try to avoid hitting them on roads.

Also like dogs, outdoor cats can transmit diseases to people. Cats allowed to roam at will are even more likely than dogs to come into contact with rabid wild animals and thus spread diseases to people. Cats that go outside are more likely to carry toxoplasmosis, which can be contracted by pregnant women and their unborn babies when they change litter boxes or garden in soil where cats have buried faeces. These threats can be avoided by keeping cats contained.

Risks to Outdoor Cats

Of course, the most important reason to keep a cat in is for the animal's own safety. Cats like to go roam, but for their own good, they shouldn't be indulged. After all, young children might like to play outside unsupervised, but allowing them to do so is negligent. The same is true for allowing cats out.

Outside threats to cats are numerous and take their toll on cat's lives. According to Barbara L. Diamond's article

"Bringing the Outdoors In" (**Cat Fancy**, April 1990), "While the average outdoor or indoor-outdoor cat lives two to three years, an indoor-only cat's average life span is 12 to 15 years or more." A look at just a few of the hazards facing outdoor cats explains why their lives can be so brief.

Disease. Rabies and other zoonotic diseases have already mentioned as threats to people. More common are diseases that inflict cats only and that have spread through contact with other cats. Two diseases that kill large numbers of cats each year are feline leukaemia and feline immunodeficiency virus. Both diseases are transmitted from cat to cat and, once contracted, result in the eventual death of the animal due to a compromised immune system. Keeping cats in helps prevent the transmission of these killers.

Parasites. Outdoor cats inevitably pick up fleas and ticks and then bring these pests into the home with them. Fleas can cause anaemia, skin irritations, and allergies in cats. These parasites also pose risks to humans since they can transmit disease through their bites. Ridding the pet and home of fleas and ticks is difficult and can expose the pet to harmful chemicals. Indoor cats aren't generally exposed to fleas, ticks, ear mites, or other parasites.

Poisoning. Poisons exist on chemically treated lawns, in bait left out to kill rats or mice, and in auto antifreeze drained from cars (a sweet substance cats love to lick, but which is deadly). Most cats love to chew on greens, but their fondness can be safely satisfied with grass grown in an indoor pot or an organically grown lawn inside your premises.

Other animals. Other cats, dogs, and wildlife are potential enemies of cats and often engage in fights that leave a cat injured. Outdoor cats can suffer torn ears, cut eyes, abscesses, and other injuries requiring expensive veterinary treatment.

Cruel people. All shelter workers can tell horror stories about cats that come in tarred and feathered, burned, or tortured in some other way by cruel kids or disturbed adults. A cat outside is a likely target for people who collect animals to sell to research laboratories. Outside pets are at the mercy of the people they encounter.

Traps. The NSPCA speculates that over 100,000 cats are caught in traps each year. Those who aren't killed may suffer for days before being released and often lose limbs from the injuries.

Traffic. Most outdoor cats die from auto accidents. It is a myth that cats are "streetwise" about cars. Cats are intelligent and alert, but they stand very little chance against fast-moving vehicles.

Pet overpopulation. Anyone who's overworked in a shelter knows that unaltered cats allowed to roam and mate at will account for millions of the cats euthanized each year. One female cat and her offspring can produce 420,000 cats in seven years. All pets, whether strictly indoor or indoor-outdoor, should be spayed or neutered. Pet owners who allow unaltered animals outside are irresponsible and at the root of the terrible pet overpopulation problem resulting in millions of animal deaths yearly.

Keeping Cats Happy Indoors

Owners will swear that their cats will be miserable if they are cooped up in the house all the time. This attitude perpetuates itself if the pet owner makes no effort to provide the cat with a stimulating environment. But with a little attention to what a cat likes and needs, a pet owner can create a home that keeps the cats healthy, safe, and happy.

In her April 1990 **Cat Fancy** article, "Bringing the Outdoors In," Barbara L. Diamond suggests that cat owners take a few minutes to view the home from the cat's perspective" in order to "shape the healthiest and most rewarding indoor environment possible." Here are some tips from Diamond (along with a couple of our own) to help cat owners keep their pets amused and fit behind closed doors:

"Open screened windows to let some fresh air in. Fresh air and sunshine are great for cats. Just be sure the screen is secure. If window ledges aren't wide enough for the cats to sit on, shelves are available that attach to ledges for cats to perch on and watch the world go by.

"Plant pots of indoor greens for cats to chew on. Grass, bird seed, alfalfa, or catnip will provide cats with fresh, tasty treats that aren't exposed to chemicals and pesticides.

"Give cats something to do while everyone is away. Hiding a few treats around the house gives the pet something to look forward to. But cats do catch on to this game quickly, so you have to be sneaky. Open paper bags left out or open closets can give cats new frontiers to explore.

"Provide a companion pet for cats that would be alone otherwise. A compatible dog or a kitten of the opposite sex will keep a cat company and will also keep him or her more active.

Offer the cat toys that are safe and stimulating. 'When choosing toys, try to think like a cat," Diamond advises. "Is the toy furry or feathery? Can it be made to hop or fly? Does it move and feel like small prey?" These kinds of toys will provide cats with the most exercise and amusement.

Diamond also cautions, "Avoid toys with small or loose parts that can become lodged in your cat's throat or be swallowed." And don't forget a cat's need to scratch and climb.

A scratching post at least two feet high is essential -- a floor to ceiling pole with perches is even better. "Play games with your cat. Human companionship is a very real need for cats. What better way to provide this and make your cat happy than by playing with him or her? In addition to playing with cat toys, a cat may also enjoy games of chase, peek-a-boo around doors, capturing nontoxic soap bubbles, or chasing light spots created with a flashlight or reflective object.

If cats have their owner's love and attention and lots to do on the inside, they won't miss the great outdoors, which, after close examination, isn't so great for cats at all.

Helping an Outdoor Cat Adjust to Life Indoors

Although it takes patience and work, an outdoor cat can be turned into a perfectly content indoor pet. The key is to make the conversion gradually and to provide lots of attention and stimulation while the cat is indoors. Begin by only letting the cat outside when you can accompany them or keep an eye on them. Gradually shorten the length of time the cat is outside until you no longer let him or her out at all. Cats are creatures of habit, so you must be careful to slowly replace their old routine of going outside with a new one of staying in. Substitute outside excursions with periods of special play time. Supervised trips out on the balcony, deck, or patio can make the transition from outside to inside a little easier. Some cat owners even screen in porches or small enclosures from their homes. These enclosed "outdoor" environments protect the cats yet allow them to get fresh air and sunshine.

Provide plenty to keep the cat occupied inside. Especially important is extra play and attention time. Cats need human companionship to be happy, and when they spend all their time out of doors, they get very little TLC. An outdoor cat may welcome the indoors if he or she gets lots of love, attention, and play.

This is a tough one, but don't give in to your cat's wails to be let out. If you are diligent, your cat will eventually see that all the fuss is getting him or her nowhere.