**Sample Paper:**

On the Prowl

The predator inches slowly toward its prey, getting closer and closer until finally it

pounces and a flurry of feathers fly. The predator is a cat, not a panther or a cougar but Felis

catus the domestic house cat. Scientists from the Fish and Wildlife Service in cooperation with the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute have estimated that 2.4 billion birds and 12.3 billion small animals are killed each year in the United States, by both feral and house cats allowed to spend time outside (Angier). Of that estimate they acknowledge that 696 million birds and 1.35 billion small animals are killed by house cats that are allowed to roam around outside (Angier). That is a mountain of beautiful migratory birds being slaughtered by entities who have names like Snookums, Whiskers, and Mister Meowzer. We love our pets but we don’t spend much time thinking about how they affect the environment surrounding our homes. To us our cats are cuddly love-sponges and sources of comfort. To the tired and hungry birds stopping for a rest on the branches of the trees in our neighborhoods, they are worse than a Freddy Kruger nightmare. Our precious roaming cats are not always the Freddy Kruger. Sometimes they are the victims of other cats, or can be hit and killed by vehicles, or be infected by other diseased animals, or even killed by larger predators. While a cat’s nature may be to hunt and roam, they need to be protected from themselves. Keeping cats indoors or in outside fenced enclosures will help keep them safe from the dangers facing them in the great outdoors.

We all know that there are some instances where an outside cat is necessary. For example, what would a barn be without a cat to keep the rodent population down? The problem with cats is that they are remarkably good hunters; it doesnʼt take them long at all to decimate the local wildlife population. Dr. Joseph Mitchell, an ecologist at the University of Richmond, along with a colleague, Dr. Ruth Beck, took part in a study using their cats to survey how many animals they killed in an 11 month time period. They found that their five cats killed at least 187 small animals (197). Mitchell and Beck started their survey with a concern for the declining population of songbirds in Virginia, and estimate that conservatively speaking a domestic cat can kill an average of 26 birds each year in urban areas; the figure for rural areas is much higher at 83 birds per year (198). Mitchell and Beck admit “The figures may be conservative, because the study only counted confirmed kills - not cases in which cats ate their victims or left the bodies hidden.” (198).

When wildlife is protected from cat predation, the cat can benefit by being protected from wildlife as well. Cats allowed to roam and interact outside can find that as they stalk their prey, predators may be stalking them. There is nothing a coyote likes better than a snack of Felis catus (Bauserman). They fit the size of the average prey of a coyote. A common story that we hear in Central Oregon comes from new arrivals to the neighborhood. A family with a precious cat moves in to the neighborhood and acclimates their cat to the new environment. Within a week, the new cat is roaming the neighborhood trees and running freely through the fields, always returning home at night for the supper in the cat food dish and a few strokes from the adoring owners of the cat. Not long after moving in though, a flyer goes up near the mailboxes stating “Missing Cat.” That flyer would stay up for months, yellowing and eventually fading away with no cat found. Every night the chorus of yips and barks would ring through the air as coyotes were on the prowl. Eventually the owner of the cat learns that it was a mistake to let that cat roam around because dozens of people in this neighborhood have lost their cats to coyotes exactly the same way.

A cat allowed to spend time outside unsupervised faces a multitude of dangers in

addition to them being prey themselves. They can face territorial fights with other cats,

accidental or intentional poisoning, getting lost or even picked up by animal control. Natalie

Angier writer for The New York Times, states in her article, “That Cuddly Kitty is Deadlier Than You Think”:

Through recent projects like Kitty Cams at the University of Georgia, in which cameras are attached to collars of indoor-outdoor pet cats to track their activities, not only have cats been filmed preying on cardinals, frogs and field mice, they have also been shown lapping up antifreeze and sewer sludge, dodging under moving cars and sparring violently with much bigger dogs. (2)

If the fear of having your can simply disappear from your life, is not convincing enough reason to keep your cat indoors, consider the health benefits. When it comes to the health and welfare of house cats, an indoor cat is a much healthier cat. Cats in the great outdoors can be subject to numerous highly contagious diseases,infections, and parasites. A responsible pet owner vaccinates their pet against the big diseases like distemper and rabies, yet there are two other diseases that are highly infectious in cats called feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) (Watson).

Feline immunodeficiency virus is similar to AIDS in humans; it canʼt be transmitted to humans but is easily transmitted through cat bites during territorial fights. Just like human infected with HIV/ AIDS, FIV can go undetected for years and spread to more and more cats. The disease kills by taking away the animal’s immune system making it more susceptible to secondary infections. Currently there is no treatment for FIV, yet the drugs used for treating AIDS in humans may help some cats (Carlson and Giffin). Dr. Jane Brunt a veterinarian, executive director of the CATalyst Council, and owner of the Cat Hospitals at Towson and Eastern Shore, Md. advises that “Considering the potential dangers outdoors, an indoor lifestyle is much safer for cats. Indoor cats have a much lower likelihood of becoming hurt or ill from outdoor hazards.” (qtd. in Watson, 1).

Franny Syufy, a cat owner and writer for About.com on the subject of cats, wrote an

article called “The Indoor-Outdoor Debate Revisited.” In her article she revisited a story she had written three years previously on the subject of allowing her cats to roam. In her previous article she thought that allowing cats to roam outside was an acceptable practice. After Shannon, one of her beloved cats died from FIV, Syufy stated she had an “epiphany” and changed her mind on letting her cats roam freely. No longer will her cats be allowed out unsupervised and she plans to build an outdoor cat proof enclosure to allow her cats outside, yet keep them safe.

Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and his colleague Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D. Certified Applied Animal

Behaviorists, state that “There is no evidence that cats ʻneedʼ to roam outside.” They believe that being kept indoors wonʼt harm them physically or behaviorally. Estep and Hetts state that “Cats can make pests out of themselves by wanting to go outside, yet a cat owner can make them happier by providing more enrichment such as toys and structures to climb and scratch.” If cats can not make the transition to being strictly an indoor cat, and the owner feels that they must be let outdoors, Estep and Hetts suggest building an outdoor escape proof cat area.

There are an estimated 80 million unwanted, stray and feral cats in the United States,

who through no fault of their own are forced to hunt, fight for territory and are doomed to wander outside without adequate care (Angier). A cat owner faces the responsibility to care for their cat and protect it from the dangers that exist in the world, from other cats, disease, accidental or intentional poisonings, vehicles, parasites, even humans who can physically injure or even kill cats. Cats are also devastating migratory bird populations. The easiest and safest way to protect your cat, and birds, is to keep it indoors, or if outside is really where you feel your schnookum needs to be, in a cat proof enclosure. As pet owners it is up to us to protect and care for them, whether that animal is a cat, dog, or a guinea pig. An animal is an investment of time, money, and overall, love. Cats deserve to be kept safe and the birds that travel through our neighborhoods deserve to make it to where they are heading.

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