



Our first workshop: 'Have you fed the cat?'

On 18th March, Do Not Feed the Animals (DNFTA) held its first collaborative workshop, involving the whole [project team](#) and over thirty members of our [Research Network](#). The aims of the workshop were twofold: firstly to shape the DNFTA research agenda relating to cats and secondly to act as a testbed for conducting participatory research online. DNFTA was launched in the early stages of the pandemic and the project team and RN are spread out across the country so it's critical for us to find effective ways of collaborating at a distance. While there was a lot of 'behind the scenes' preparation, the workshop was really successful and so we'll be using this as a model for future events – eventually transforming into an online stream running alongside in-person meetings.

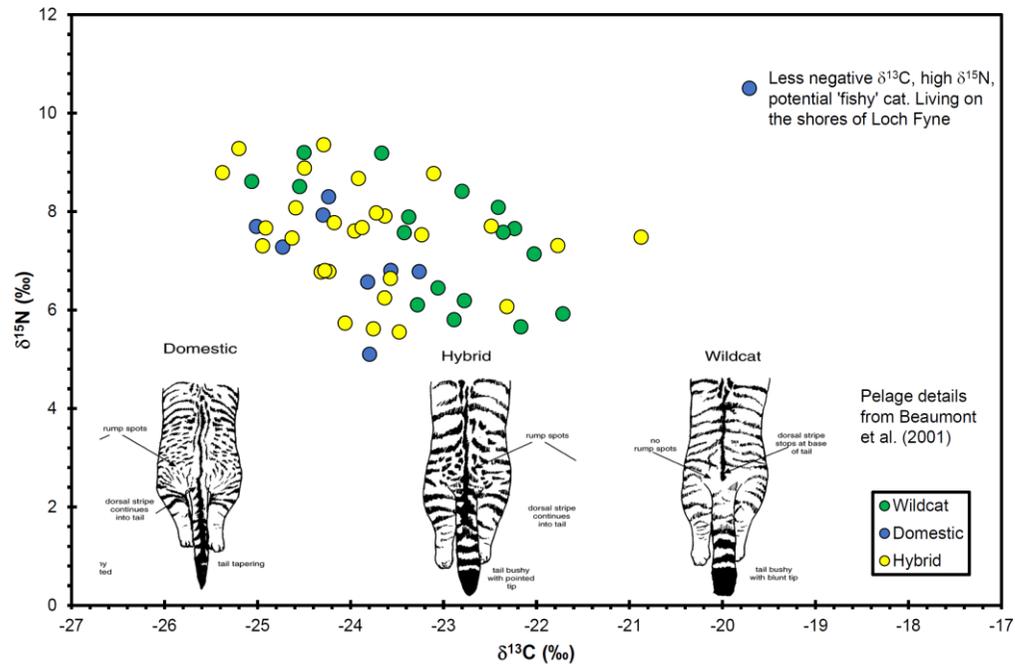
The RN members who joined us included colleagues from museums, heritage and conservation organisations, alongside academics from across the disciplinary spectrum. We met initially on Zoom and, to break the ice, everyone shared an image summing up their relationships with cats. As you can see this was quite silly but also helped us test Padlet – our main feedback platform – and turned out to be a useful reference point later as we started digging into the ambiguities of human-cat relations.



Cat-human relations across Do Not Feed The Animals



We kicked off the workshop proper with a quick 'work in progress' presentation from the DNFTA project team, demonstrating how we are already working together to collate and analyse data from contemporary and historical wildcat specimens, creating new insights into their feeding habits over space and time.



Isotope analysis of wildcat, 'hybrid' and feral domestic cat samples – eating differently?



Breakouts

By now, most of us are familiar with the toe-curling experience of sitting in a Zoom meeting watching a screen of black tiles while one or two people try to keep the conversation going. The main point of the DNFTA workshops is to get conversations going so we quickly shifted into smaller breakout rooms, facilitated by members of the project team. Ahead of *Have You Fed The Cat?* our ECRs had created short films of interviews with members of the RN about 'key issues' relating to cats (domestication, feeding, health, human-animal relations, and the environment). We used these as the jumping off point for conversation, asking breakout participants to respond to the films: what was most interesting, what was most important, and what was missing?

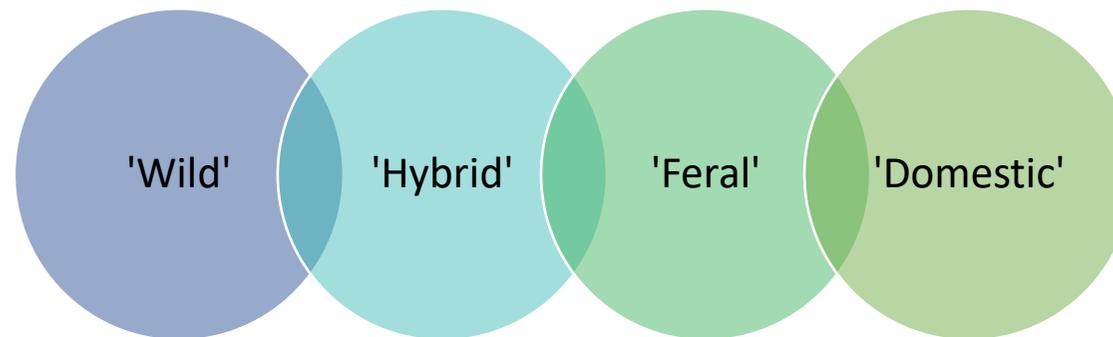
So many rich themes emerged from this, including (as we'd hoped) several topics which were new to the DNFTA team and which will feed into our research. These included:

- Breeding of cats for neotenic tendencies (to look like kittens) and for particularly valued coat colours,
- Cat manipulation of humans as much as *vice versa* (e.g. miaowing and behaving in ways that will get them fed),
- Cat-human relations in gendered social contexts, especially historically single sex communities (monastery cats, ship's cats in the navy, the association between cats and witches),
- ['Domestication'](#) compared to ['commensalism'](#), compared to ['taming'](#) of big cats and wildcats,
- Hunting by domestic and feral cats (including impacts on ecosystems and behaviour of prey species),
- Environmental impacts of pet food and human choices around what to feed cats,
- Hybridisation of domestic and wildcats and the contested implications of this for dys/functioning ecosystems,
- Legislation and - gaps in – regulation and policy relating to cats,
- Positioning of cats on a spectrum of wild to domestic, with cats moving between these states including as ferals (often as 'pests') and hybrids,
- Zoonoses shared between cats and humans (particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19!).



After reconvening to share our thoughts, we moved into a second breakout session with a different mix of people. We changed the topic to focus on designing a 'fantasy research project' about cat-feeding. Again, this prompted loads of rich discussion. One topic which came up several times was how we differentiate between a wild and a domestic cat, what the legal implications of such a distinction are, and what research would be needed to investigate this. Linked to this were questions about cats in society and nature, including whether they are ever truly domesticated or even truly wild, given the anthropogenic environments which they live in, and questions relating to 'native', 'non-native' and 'invasive' species.

A related idea explored the 'labelling' of cats as 'domestic', 'feral' or 'wild' and an investigation of how those labels change across time, place and culture, including the implications of these labels for the cats themselves. Meanwhile, another group focussed on the impacts of domestic cats on garden birds and proposed a project deploying citizen science data to study bird feeding and cat predation across the UK, including differences between rural and urban areas.



Following the second breakout, we reconvened, shared initial thoughts, and then opened the floor to a wider exploration of the issues raised when we think through cat feeding. Everyone's enthusiasm was palpable and many participants commented on how wide ranging – and properly interdisciplinary – the conversation had been. To close the day, we all stepped away from our screens, some of us meeting up later in the DNFTA virtual bar on ['Gather.Town'](#). While a little odd, we found this worked remarkably well, with people exploring, chatting and several groups gravitating to the 'sofas' to continue the conversation...



Exploring Gather.town

After the workshop, the DNFTA team ran our own debrief session, have spent some time digesting the huge amount we learned from the RN, and have taken a much-needed Easter break. There are several lines of enquiry that we will be pursuing, including investigations of the biosocial shaping of cats' coats, cats' manipulations of people (more widely, the important differences between passive *feeding of* animals and active *eating by* animals), and cat-human relationships in rapidly changing landscapes.

Thank you **so much** to all the RN members who gave their time, ideas and enthusiasm to *Have You Fed The Cat?* We're already planning our next workshop – in which we want to learn more about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon animal feeding (across wildlife, pets, zoos and policy) – so watch this space!