

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI) FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA) FOR THE RESTORATION OF SAN NICOLAS ISLAND'S SEABIRDS AND PROTECTION OF NATIVE FAUNA BY REMOVING FERAL CATS, AT SAN NICOLAS ISLAND, NAVAL BASE VENTURA COUNTY, VENTURA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500-1508) implementing the National Environmental Policy Act, and Chief of Naval Operations Instruction 5090.1C, the Department of the Navy (Navy) gives notice that an EA has been prepared and an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required for the Restoration of San Nicolas Island's Seabirds and Protection of Native Fauna by Removing Feral Cats at San Nicolas Island, Naval Base Ventura County (NBVC), Ventura County, California.

Proposed Action: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), with the Navy as a cooperating agency, proposes to implement the Proposed Action in the Final Environmental Assessment (Final EA) for the Restoration of San Nicolas Island's Seabirds and Protection of Native Fauna by Removing Feral Cats, issued March 2009. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to restore seabird populations and protect other native fauna on San Nicolas Island, including federally and state listed threatened species, by removing feral cats.

The Proposed Action is modeled after other successful efforts to remove feral cats from islands and is funded by the Montrose Trustee Council as part of the Montrose Settlements Restoration Program (MSRP). Under the Proposed Action, feral cats will be removed from San Nicolas Island using a combination of techniques. An adaptive management approach will be used, which involves careful monitoring of the effectiveness of each method to maximize efficiency and reduce potential environmental impacts.

Public Review

On May 19, 2008, the Draft EA was posted on Montrose Settlements Restoration Program's website and the Service's Region 8 website. On June 4, 2008, a public open house regarding the project was held at the Ventura City Hall, Ventura, California.

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On June 17, 2008, the 30-day public comment period closed. The Service received approximately 5,788 comments from individuals, conservation groups, and other organizations in response to the Draft EA. Out of the 5,788 comments, a total of 1,465 represented unique comments. The remaining 4,323 comments were generic electronic form letter submissions that all contained identical statements regarding the proposed project. A summary of the comments and the Service's response is incorporated into the Final EA in Appendix 1.

Based on public comments, the Service and the Navy engaged in discussions with several animal welfare organizations. As a result of those discussions, a collaborative Pilot Program on San Nicolas Island was undertaken with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) during November 2008 to January 2009. This Pilot Program consisted of testing cage traps on the island and transferring captured cats to HSUS selected and Service approved facilities on the mainland for long-term care. The Proposed Action has been modified in response to the Pilot Program by incorporating the use of cage traps and providing animal welfare organizations, including HSUS, the opportunity to take permanent custody of any healthy trapped cats rather than euthanize them on island.

The Proposed Action is comprised of the following elements:

Live Trapping

Padded leg-hold live trapping is an effective technique for capturing feral cats on San Nicolas Island and will be the primary method used as part of the Proposed Action. Locations for placing padded leg-hold live traps will be determined using a variety of methods. Padded leg-hold live traps require experienced personnel to select trap placement locations and to correctly set the traps.

In response to public comment, cage trapping is incorporated into the Proposed Action. Although cage traps are not as effective as padded leg-hold traps for capturing feral cats on San Nicolas Island, these types of traps serve as another tool in the adaptive management approach to this project and will be used as appropriate.

All traps will be checked at least daily, either visually or electronically using a telemetry monitoring system. When a trap is sprung, a switch will trigger the transmitter to send an

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identification (ID) code indicating the status of the trap. The unique ID code of each transmitter will identify each trap, the location of which will be recorded by a Global Positioning System (GPS). This system will allow field technicians to quickly respond to traps that have been sprung.

Transfer of Cats to Mainland

Based on public comment on the May 2008 Draft EA, the Service and the Navy engaged in discussions with several animal welfare organizations, including HSUS and Best Friends Animal Society. As a result of those discussions, a collaborative Pilot Program on San Nicolas Island took place during November 2008 to January 2009. The Pilot Program consisted of testing cage traps on the island as well as transportation and transfer of seven captured cats to HSUS-selected and Service-approved facilities on the mainland for long-term care.

The HSUS has indicated their interest in a continued partnership with the Service and Navy. Consequently, healthy feral cats that can be safely removed from a trap site may be transferred to the custody of a Service approved animal welfare organization, such as HSUS. These cats would be kept for the remainder of their lives in humane conditions in Service approved facilities constructed to prevent cats from re-introduction to the wild or threatening wildlife on the mainland.

Young kittens captured on San Nicolas Island that are healthy and likely to be adoptable may be considered for transfer to a Service approved animal welfare organization, to include HSUS and the Ventura County Animal Shelter. This decision would be made in consultation with a licensed veterinarian on a case-by-case basis.

If a trapped feral cat is unhealthy or seriously injured, or if the Service and Navy determine that suitable mainland facilities are not available for the feral cats, then the cat would be humanely euthanized on island in consultation with a veterinarian and in accordance with guidelines established by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Use of Tracking Dogs

The use of specialized tracking dogs remains a component of the Proposed Action as an adaptive management measure. These specialized dogs are trained to focus exclusively on feral cats

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and completely disregard other species including island foxes, birds, and rodents. Dogs are trained to find feral cats by following ground and/or wind-borne scents and identify the location of the feral cat; they are not allowed to attack the feral cats nor is such a measure part of the identification protocol. The dog handler will shoot the feral cat when a clear, fatal shot can be delivered. In some instances, feral cats may be deep in holes. If this occurs, a live trap will be set at the entrance to the hole. Dogs would undergo strict quarantine procedures to ensure that potential impacts to the island fox from the introduction of disease or parasites are avoided.

Use of Spotlight Hunting

Spotlight hunting may be of limited use on San Nicolas Island due to the high density of island foxes causing false alarms that require further investigation. Because distinguishing a feral cat from a fox in some circumstances can be difficult, a shot would be fired only when the shooter is 100 percent certain of the identification of the target. However, spotlight hunting may prove to be a useful technique in special circumstances, combined with the use of tracking dogs.

Mitigation Measures

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the Proposed Action. A full summary of these measures can be found in Chapter 3 of the Final EA. Several of these measures include:

- 1) There will be no permanent loss of habitat as a result of this project.
- 2) Technicians, hunters, and tracking dogs will maintain at minimum a 300-ft buffer from marine mammals hauled out on the island, a 500-ft buffer from roosting seabirds and shorebirds, and a 1,000-ft buffer from nesting seabirds and shorebirds.
- 3) The use of live traps would be restricted during the island fox breeding season to minimize potential effects.
- 4) Traps would be modified to reduce the risk on injury to both foxes and cats.
- 5) A state-of-the-art trap telemetry monitoring system would be used that provides immediate notification when a trap is sprung. Traps would be monitored continuously by the monitoring system.

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- 6) Foxes requiring care would be held in a clinical facility on-island and given all necessary treatment until they can be released.
- 7) New temporary trails would be routed outside of prime habitat areas for island night lizards.
- 8) Non-toxic ammunition will be used on San Nicolas Island.

Project Monitoring

Monitoring of feral cats, foxes and seabirds will begin before, during, and after the removal phase. Trapping will continue uninterrupted throughout the removal phase and aid in the confirmation of complete removal. As part of the adaptive management approach, population indices will be derived from trapping rates and other detection methods and will be used by managers throughout the project to gauge effectiveness of methods and progress towards the goal of complete removal. Additional monitoring throughout the project will be conducted to ensure that any negative environmental effects are avoided or minimized.

Existing Conditions: San Nicolas Island serves as important breeding habitat for the western gull (*Larus occidentalis*) and Brandt's cormorant (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*), and is home to the endemic San Nicolas Island fox (*Urocyon littoralis dickeyi*), federally threatened western snowy plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*) and island night lizard (*Xantusia riversiana*). The removal of this non-native predator is an important step in restoring the ecosystem of San Nicolas Island. Although the Island itself, as it is owned by the Navy, is excluded from the coastal zone, seabirds are considered coastal resources for purposes of analyzing affects under the Coastal Zone Management Act.

Alternatives Analyzed:

Alternative 1. No Action

Under the No Action alternative, the current intermittent feral cat control efforts would continue, but a comprehensive removal strategy would not be implemented. As funding allowed, the Navy would conduct intermittent feral cat control efforts in accordance with the Invasive Species Executive Order (E.O. 13122) and general recommendations in the Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan (INRMP) for San Nicolas Island. Feral cats, however, would continue to reproduce, prey on seabirds and other native wildlife, including federally and state threatened species, and compete with the state threatened island fox. The

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negative impacts of feral cats on native fauna would continue on San Nicolas Island.

Alternative 2. Live Trapping Only

Under this alternative, feral cats would be removed from San Nicolas Island using padded leg-hold live traps and cage traps exclusively. This alternative works well under dry conditions; however, rainfall tends to compromise the effectiveness of traps and lures, thereby reducing capture rates. Because its utility is subject to weather conditions, using this alternative exclusively could increase the number of months required to remove all of the feral cats from the island. Increasing the time to complete the project would give the feral cats more time to reproduce. In addition, some cats are expected to be trap-shy which would further increase the time to complete the project.

Alternative 3. Spotlight Hunting and Limited Live Trapping

Under this alternative, feral cats would be removed from San Nicolas Island primarily by use of spotlight hunting and secondarily by use of padded leg-hold live trapping and cage traps. Spotlight hunting can be an effective technique to reduce feral cat numbers locally but is generally not a viable tool for extensive use in larger scale removal efforts.

Alternative 4. Hunting with Tracking Dogs and Limited Live Trapping

Under this alternative, feral cats would be removed from San Nicolas Island primarily through the use of hunting with tracking dogs and secondarily by padded leg-hold live trapping and cage traps. Hunting with tracking dogs can greatly increase the effectiveness of spotlight hunting, especially when feral cats are wary of other methods or they occur at low densities. In combination with limited but strategic leg-hold live trapping and cage traps, hunting with tracking dogs may be an effective method.

However, the Proposed Action is the preferred alternative because none of the above alternatives individually have been proven to be as effective as the adaptive approach of the Proposed Action.

In addition, a number of alternatives were considered and dismissed with a rationale provided in the Final EA. These include the use of trap-and-transport only, poison, disease, kill traps, immunocontraception, and trap-neuter-release.

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Chapter 4 of the Final EA contains more detailed information about each alternative and Chapter 6 contains specific information on the anticipated environmental consequences of each alternative.

Environmental Effects: Utilizing best management practices will minimize impacts to the environment during implementation of the Proposed Action. The nature of the proposed action and the mitigation measures that will be included (summarized above and described in detail in the Final EA) hereby incorporated by reference, will ensure that no significant environmental impacts to the human environment would occur from the proposed action.

The Service completed an internal Section 7 consultation under the Endangered Species Act. This consultation concluded that the Proposed Action would not adversely affect listed species on San Nicolas Island. A copy of this consultation is included in Appendix 2 of the Final EA. Marine mammals would not be affected by the proposed project; therefore, consultation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service was not required.

The Service's proposed action is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988. The Navy and the Service also analyzed the potential impacts of the project on the coastal zone and determined that the effect on coastal resources (e.g., seabirds) is purely beneficial. The California Coastal Commission concurred in May 2008 with this assessment.

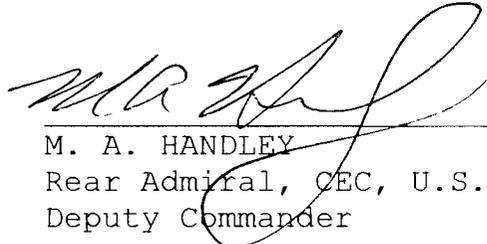
Consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has been completed by the Navy. The Navy received concurrence from the SHPO in July 2008 that the Proposed Action will not adversely affect historic properties.

Finding: Based on the analysis presented in the EA and coordination with the Service, California Coastal Commission, and SHPO, the Navy finds that implementation of the proposed action will not significantly impact the quality of the human or natural environment.

The EA Jointly prepared by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Navy addressing this action is on file and interested parties may access the EA at: www.montroserestoration.gov

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02 April 2009
Date


M. A. HANDLEY
Rear Admiral, CEC, U.S. Navy
Deputy Commander