



San Nicolas Island Restoration Project

Frequently Asked Questions

Q 1. What is the purpose of the San Nicolas Island Restoration Project?

The purpose of the proposed project is to improve nesting success for seabirds, and reduce predation on and competition with the other native wildlife on San Nicolas Island by removing all feral cats.

Priority seabirds for restoration on San Nicolas Island include Brandt's cormorants and western gulls whose populations were affected by past releases of DDT off the coast of southern California. In addition to seabirds, the federally threatened island night lizard and western snowy plover, the endemic deer mouse, and the State threatened island fox are expected to benefit by the removal of feral cats from San Nicolas Island.

Q2. What is the Montrose Settlements Restoration Program (MSRP)?

The MSRP is a multi-agency effort created to restore natural resources that were injured by DDT and PCB contamination off the coast of Southern California. DDTs are chemicals that affect the ability of birds to produce normal eggshells and PCBs are chemicals that cause cancer and other health problems. The Montrose Trustee Council (Council) is funding the San Nicolas Island project using settlement monies from a lawsuit against the Montrose Chemical Corporation and other defendants.

The Council is responsible for deciding how to use these settlement monies to restore the natural resources and services harmed by the DDT and PCB releases. The Council consists of representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, California Department of Fish and Game, California State Lands Commission, and California Department of Parks and Recreation.

The San Nicolas Island Restoration Project was selected as a priority action in the Final Restoration Plan/Environmental Impact Statement for the MSRP in October 2005. This document can be found at www.montrosere restoration.gov.

Q3. What are the benefits of the project?

The proposed project will benefit the biological resources on San Nicolas Island over the long and short term. On San Nicolas Island, feral cats are known to predate on nesting seabirds and shorebirds, the federally threatened island night lizard, and the endemic deer mouse. Removal of these feral cats will reduce predation on these sensitive species.

Feral cats directly compete with the State threatened island fox for habitat and food resources on San Nicolas Island. Removal of the feral cat will benefit the island fox by reducing competition for resources and habitat.

Feral cats may also carry diseases such as toxoplasmosis and rabies that can be transferred to the island fox and southern sea otter. Removal of the feral cat may potentially reduce the risk of disease to native wildlife.

By removing the feral cat from the San Nicolas ecosystem, native wildlife will directly benefit from the project over the long term.

Q4. Where is San Nicolas Island?

San Nicolas Island is one of eight Channel Islands and is located 61 miles offshore of Southern California. The U.S. Navy owns and manages this island. The island is nine miles long and about 3.5 miles wide.

Q5. What is special about San Nicolas Island?

San Nicolas Island supports a number of species endemic (i.e., found nowhere else) to the Channel Islands, including at least 20 plants, 25 invertebrates, one reptile, three birds, and two mammals. San Nicolas Island is home to the federally threatened island night lizard, western snowy plover, and southern sea otter, as well as the State threatened San Nicolas Island fox. San Nicolas supports nesting seabirds, such as the western gull and Brandt's cormorant. Seabirds are an important part of the island ecosystem and are also an important part of the surrounding marine ecosystem.

The predominant plant community on the island is coastal bluff scrub. San Nicolas Island supports three natural rare vegetative communities: southern coastal bluff scrub, southern sand dune, and southern foredunes.

Q6. How will the feral cats be eradicated from San Nicolas Island?

The methods proposed for removing feral cats from San Nicolas Island include live trapping (both padded leg-hold traps and cage traps), spotlight hunting, and hunting with specialized tracking dogs. Healthy, trapped feral cats may be made available to a USFWS-approved party if they provide adequate assurance that the cats will be cared for in an enclosed facility on the mainland or other secure indoor location for the remainder of their lives. If the USFWS and Navy determine that suitable, enclosed facilities or responsible parties are not available to accept the feral cats, then the cats will be humanely euthanized on-island.

Professional hunters will use non-toxic ammunition and the dogs will be used for tracking purposes only. Neither snare traps nor poisons will be used.

A state-of-the-art trap monitoring system will be in place that instantaneously notifies personnel when a trap has been sprung. This system will allow for a rapid response and reduce the time that an animal is restrained in the trap.

Q7. Has this type of project ever been done before?

Yes. Removal of non-native species (such as feral cats, rats, goats, etc) is a well established tool to conserve biodiversity on islands. Feral cats have been successfully removed from more than 70 islands worldwide, including Ascension Island in the United Kingdom, Macquarie Island of Australia, and Natividad Island in Mexico.

Within the Channel Islands, several large-scale restoration efforts have been recently completed including the eradication of the black rat on Anacapa Island in 2001/2002 and the feral pig on Santa Cruz Island in 2005/2006. All of these removals were completed with minimal impacts to native island species and have resulted in a marked recovery of native wildlife, including the Xantus's murrelet on Anacapa Island and the Santa Cruz Island fox.

Q8. Why not capture and adopt the feral cats out?

In 2008, the USFWS and U.S. Navy entered into a Pilot Program with The Humane Society of the United States. As part of this program, seven feral cats were transported off San Nicolas Island. Based upon the outcomes of the Pilot Program, the USFWS will consider adoption of some adult feral cats during the Proposed Action as a potential option. To prevent harm to wildlife on the mainland, the USFWS will only transfer cats from San Nicolas Island to shelter, fostering, or adoption facilities that require a contractual agreement from potential adopters to keep cats indoors at all times.

Q9. Why not neuter the cats and release them on San Nicolas or another off-island location?

In order to protect native wildlife, Navy policy prohibits Trap-Neuter-Release (TNR) on their property; therefore, TNR is not an option on San Nicolas Island.

Moving captured feral cats and releasing them into feral colonies on the mainland is not an appropriate option for this project. Given the negative impacts of feral cats on wildlife, the USFWS does not consider the addition of feral cats from San Nicolas Island to the existing free-roaming cat population on the mainland to be consistent with our obligations to protect wildlife.

Q10. What about the use of contraception?

Neither contraceptives nor chemical sterilants are suitable for eradicating the population of feral cats on San Nicolas Island. There is currently no contraceptive available for cats that would be practical for this purpose. Contraception does not meet the project's goal of removing all of the feral cats in order to restore seabirds and other native fauna on San Nicolas Island. Feral cats would continue to predate on native wildlife.

Q11. Are you concerned about the welfare of the cats?

Yes. All of the removal techniques proposed for use in the project are designed to be as humane as possible. In particular, a state-of-the-art trap monitoring system will be in place that instantaneously notifies personnel when a trap has been sprung. This system will allow a rapid response and reduce the time that an animal is restrained in the trap.

A one-time complete feral cat removal effort will likely reduce the number of animals that are euthanized over the long term. Currently, feral cats on San Nicolas Island are subject to periodic population control through trapping and hunting, a necessary management action undertaken by the Navy as part of their commitment to protecting wildlife on the island. If this type of population control were to continue in perpetuity, it would cause untold numbers of deaths in both the feral cat and native wildlife populations.

Q12. Are you concerned about the San Nicolas Island fox?

Yes. Strict protocols will be in place to ensure that impacts to the island fox are avoided and minimized.

Because of the similarity in size between the island fox and the feral cat, modifications have been made to the traps to reduce the likelihood of catching and injuring island foxes. To further minimize the potential impacts, the use of padded leg-hold traps will be restricted during sensitive periods of the fox breeding season. A state-of-the-art trap monitoring system will be in place that instantaneously notifies personnel when a trap has been sprung. This system will allow for a rapid response and reduce the time a fox is restrained in the trap. In addition, tracking dogs will be specifically trained to avoid foxes. The recent use of tracking dogs on Santa Cruz Island during the feral pig project demonstrated that dogs can be successfully used without negative impacts on the island fox.

Any injured foxes will receive immediate veterinary care at a clinical facility on San Nicolas Island and given proper treatment until release.

Q13. How many feral cats are on the island?

We estimate that there are between 100-200 feral cats on the island.

Q14. How long have cats been on San Nicolas Island and how did they get there?

It is not known when the feral population became established, but large numbers of feral cats were roaming the island by the late 1950s. Cats were likely originally brought to the island as pets but later possibly for pest control.

Feral cats are the only known remaining invasive, non-native mammal on San Nicolas Island.

Q15. How long will the project take?

We estimate that the effort to remove feral cats will take approximately 1 year; however, there will be several years of post-project monitoring to document success and monitor the response of wildlife.

Q16. Will this project affect San Nicolas Island's southern sea otters?

The feral cats on San Nicolas Island may carry diseases that threaten human health, fox health and the health of sea otters in the surrounding coastal waters. Removal of the feral cat may potentially reduce the risk of disease to native wildlife, including the southern sea otter.

For more information, see the Final Environmental Assessment for the project at www.montroserestoration.gov.