

Sun, Sea, and Cats: Humano-Cat Cultures of the Costa del Sol

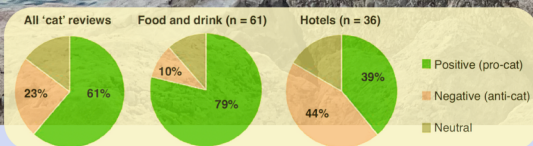
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Kris earned her PhD in Anthrozoology from the University of Exeter (2023). Her doctoral research focused on discourses surrounding roaming cats (*Felis catus*) and cat-human relations. Since 2019 she has written or contributed to 15 peer-reviewed articles. Visit www.academiccatlady.com to learn more about Kris' research and collaborative projects, or scan QR code. Email: tinehill@gmail.com



1. Introduction

Situated at the intersection of tourism, migration, and human-animal studies, this multi-species ethnographic study focuses on the relationship between residents, visitors, and a colony of free-living cats (*Felis catus*) inhabiting a popular "sun and sea" style vacation destination on the Costa del Sol, Spain. Emergent themes from preliminary fieldwork and analysis of TripAdvisor comments (Hill 2024) informs the current project, which specifically engages with colony caretakers, tourists, and locals (feline and human). The study builds upon the concept of a transnational community-building, residential tourism (O'Reilly 2000; 2009, and more-than-human cultural co-creation by focusing on how British expatriates, tourism-based business owners, and visitors engage with and relate to free-roaming cats.



Proportion of pro-cat, anti-cat, and cat-neutral TripAdvisor reviews of hotels and food and drink establishments in Torremolinos from Jan 2010–Jan 2022 (Hill, 2024). Additional data collected through May 2024 does not alter percentages.

2. Methods and Ethical Considerations

A thematic analysis of observations and interactions with free-living cats was performed based on fieldwork undertaken from 15 May to 5 June 2024. Fieldnotes and video footage was used to capture and record the daily habits and behaviours of 51 unowned cats living along a 1.6 km stretch of the Torremolinos promenade. Data includes interactions between cats and tourists and feeders. Humans were not intentionally filmed without their consent, and any faces or identifying information caught on camera was anonymised prior to analysis. Cats were observed from a respectful distance and any interactions were feline-driven.



3. Preliminary Analysis of the Data

Data corroborates previous fieldwork regarding the tourist responses towards cat, which is more positive than TripAdvisor suggests.

Visitor Perceptions of the Cats

Best Life: 'They just have the best life don't they!' (several versions overhead)
Concern: 'She's very thin!' (the cat is unwell and on a special diet).
Sad: 'Such as shame they have no home' (this is their home)
Wild Cats: 'They are wild cats' (most are abandoned companion cats).

Visitors Love the Cats!

Joy: 'Oh look, another kitty' (exclamations of joy from children, women, and men of all ages).
Photos: So many people were photographing or filming the cats.
Petting: People of all ages were seen petting the cats. Sometimes asking for consent, or being mindful of the cats reaction.



Feline Sociality

Many of the cats express affiliative behaviours towards tourists and initiate contact. Several are vocal and will jump onto a strangers' lap. Others are more timid and will hide from tourists, but come to the feeders. Aside from squabbles during feeding time, the cats mostly get along and have established micro territories and favourite spots. Several are bonded pairs.

Less Considerate Engagement

'Careful love, you nearly puked on that cat!' (cat appeared unfazed). While some cats are adept at avoiding unwanted attention from inebriated tourists, others seem unbothered. Similarly, some cats tolerated noisy or grabbing children, while others jumped up out of their reach.

4. Feeders

In addition to the feeders (with a licence from the council), there are locals and tourists who provide food for the cats. Littering by unofficial feeders is a concern as it jeopardises tolerance towards the cats from the authorities. Likewise, unattended food can attract rodents and contaminate the soil. Unsuitable food items are also a concern. For example, some cats recently got diarrhoea after being fed coconut milk by a well-meaning resident.



Health, Safety, and Welfare

Effective TNR: No kittens this 'kitten season'!
Veterinarian Care: As well overseeing the neutering of new arrivals, sick or injured are treated by a veterinarian from *Málaga Felina*. Official feeders notify *Málaga Felina* of any sick cat and administer medication where necessary.
Injuries & Accidents: Despite it being a pedestrian walkway, cyclists and scooters speed around the corner and four cats have been hit and injured in the passed year.
Their home: Many of the cats have been here for years and appear to be enjoying life. They can climb into the rocks for shelter or to avoid human interactions, or they can enjoy human company.

Multi-Species Communities

In addition to observing how cats related to each other, human residents, and tourists, relations with resident pigeons and interactions with companion dogs was documented.

5. The Future of the Project

This study is a continuation of a side-project I developed during my doctoral studies at the University of Exeter, UK (see Hill 2024). The current data will be written up during my tenure as a visiting scholar at University Hradec Králové, Czechia (Sept 2024– Feb 2025). Beyond that I seek long-term employment where I can continue my research and apply for external funding. Future research will include quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with visitors, residents, cat care-takers and veterinarians, business owners, and local authorities.

References

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