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# Cats, community, and tourism on the Costa del Sol: a transspecies ethnography

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## ABSTRACT

Situated at the intersection of tourism, migration, and human-animal studies, this paper is based on a transspecies ethnographic study of a colony of cats (*Felis catus*) living on the Costa del Sol, Spain. It emphasises how cats are part of the local community who are impacted by tourism. Focusing on the relationships between residents, visitors, and free-living (unowned) cats inhabiting a popular 'sun and sea' style vacation destination, fieldwork documented behaviours and interactions between cats and humans. Drawing upon a concept of interspecies intersubjectivity and co-creation of culture, within a multispecies framework, a qualitative thematic analysis was applied to understand central aspects of cat-human relations and transspecies communities. Namely, (1) the dynamics of a transspecies community situated within a tourist hotspot, (2) relations surrounding feeding and care, and (3) how tourists relate to the colony cats, and vice versa. These findings provide insight into how cats engage with human residents and mostly pro-cat tourists, and vice versa, and how this shapes the social landscape of cats embedded within a community built around tourism. The study highlights how community cat projects are not just about animal welfare and can be framed as a form of social inclusion, caring, and community-building.

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## Introduction

A growing area of tourism studies recognises how human activities impact members of other species and considers the moral position of more-than-human animals and their individual interests (Fennell et al., 2024). There is increasing recognition of the need to adopt post-humanist ethical frameworks that decentralise the human and conceptualise the social world in terms of interactive, non-hierarchical assemblages (Chakraborty, 2021; Guia & Jamal, 2025; Tomassini, 2024). Mkono and Hughes (2025, p. 2) posited that '[non-human] animals are just as relevant to the geographies of tourism as humans. They both occupy and compete in space and place'. Much of the

existing body of literature is centred around wildlife tourism and animal attractions or exhibitions, primarily examining issues related to animal welfare (see Fennell, 2012, 2013; Fennell et al., 2024; Mkono & Hughes, 2025; Winter, 2020). Free-living (unowned) cats (*Felis catus*) are a common phenomenon in many cities and tourist destinations, occupying and competing in space and time alongside human interests. Cats occupying Japanese islands have even become popular tourist attractions in their own right, and the old touristic neighbourhoods of Tokyo and Hiroshima are known for their sizable population of friendly cats (Seo et al., 2022; Seo & Tanida, 2018; Vitale, 2022). However, without sufficient infrastructure and funds to distribute food and medical provisions, including birth control, both the cats and those who care about them invariably suffer (Gunther et al., 2018; Natoli et al., 2019; Vasileva & McCulloch, 2024). Caring within a multispecies community recognizes that more-than-human wellbeing is also fundamental to human welfare (Finkler & Terkel, 2011; Shingne & Reese, 2022).

This paper is based on a transspecies ethnographic study of a colony of cats (*Felis catus*) living on the Costa del Sol, Spain, focusing on cat-human interactions involving residents and tourists. The distinction between multispecies and transspecies is subtle, and transspecies ethnography is arguably a form of multispecies ethnography. A multispecies community is one comprised of individuals from different species (including animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms) who form interdependent relationships. Multispecies ethnography strives to understand the kind of relations that arise from non-hierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the interconnectivity of co-existing or co-habiting species (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). A transspecies perspective re-embeds the human within the animal matrix and can be used as a lens through which to examine how meaning and culture are co-created across species boundaries (Bradshaw, 2010; Erickson, 2018; Kohn, 2007). Rather than simply describing interactions between members of different species, a transspecies account focuses on how individual actors of all species change as a consequence of those interactions. Both cats and humans possess subjective minds and co-creation of culture *via* interspecies intersubjectivity and joint meaning making has been documented in a range of contexts, including the home, animal shelters, and urban neighbourhoods (Alger & Alger, 1999; Hill, 2024c, 2024a; Jaroš, 2018; White, 2013; Young, 2013). From co-creation of meaning, transspecies culture emerges, embedded within the time and space of the material and social environment. The current study focuses on transspecies community-building by examining how the feline presence shapes human behaviour and vice versa, and how interspecies relations ultimately shape the cultural and physical landscape.

When they live independently of human guardians or owners, members of domesticated species such as cats occupy a liminal space of being neither 'pet' nor 'wild' (Crowley et al., 2020). 'Feral' is a loaded term when applied to animals who are seen as transgressive, or a nuisance, and free-roaming cats ignite concerns for the wildlife they may predate upon (Barcott, 2013; Hill et al., 2022; Jaroš, 2021). Their status as a companion animal contributes to the perceived wretchedness of unowned cats and contrasts with a notion of cats as wild-like animals whose independence we have a moral obligation to honour (Abbate, 2020; Hill, 2024d). Most notable is how these conflicting and contradicting concerns or perceptions of cats are based in

anthropocentrism. In studying more-than-human worlds, Chakraborty (2021, p. 124) asserted that a general need to 'move beyond anthropocentrism and to embrace fluid, theoretically unmoored methods as an alternative is informed by the position that our knowledge is constantly shaped by non-human others'. However, within tourism scholarship there remains a deficit in attempts to consider and uphold the 'voices' of non-human stakeholders, particularly free-living urban animals who are not tourist attractions per se. The notion that cats and humans can co-create meaning through interspecies intersubjectivity (the space between conscious minds where shared meaning is made) is supported by ethnographic research (Alger & Alger, 1999; Hill, 2024a; Jaroš, 2018; White, 2013; Young, 2013).

Within street-cat and humano-cat cultures (the culture of 'pet' cats), both intra- and inter-species transmission of information occurs, and this two-way communication shapes the social worlds of both species (Jaroš, 2018). Therefore, a transspecies approach that engages with interspecies intersubjectivity enables the feline perspective to be given equal consideration in terms of the impact tourism has on a community.

A colony of free-living cats populating a popular beach-style holiday destination on the Costa del Sol, Spain, serves as a case study to elucidate prominent features of a transspecies community that is co-created between cats and humans within a touristic landscape. Tourism along the Costa del Sol is built around the classic 'sun and sea' style budget holidays and a culture of Northern European migrants who live there seasonally or permanently (Blázquez-Salom & Murray, 2023; Fàbrega-Domènech, 2019; Navarro-Jurado et al., 2019; O'Reilly, 2000, 2003, 2020). Torremolinos is a coastal town located with a population of around 71,000 permanent residents (INE, n.d.). In contrast to other destinations in Andalusia and the Málaga province, Torremolinos has recovered and exceeded the number of pre-Covid19 visitors from the UK (FRONTUR, 2025). Torremolinos recorded over 1.5 million overnight stays in 2024, with the largest number of international visitors arriving from the UK (INE, 2025n.d.). Foreign Europeans constitute an estimated 60% of the migrant population in Spain, and are mostly concentrated in the coastal regions (Oliveau et al., 2019; Valero-Escandell et al., 2022). Northern Europeans who choose Spain as their country of residence are referred to as 'long-term tourists', 'residential tourists', or 'retirement migrants', with the latter referring to those aged 55 or older (Fàbrega Domènech, 2023; Marí-Klose & Calzada, 2024; O'Reilly, 2009). Because many of these migrants have previously visited on vacations, this phenomenon has been examined through the lens of both Tourism Studies and Migration Studies (Fàbrega Domènech, 2023; Marí-Klose & Calzada, 2024; O'Reilly, 2003). British migrants tend to choose tourist destinations with good infrastructure, where there are large British communities, and where English language activities and services are readily available (Fàbrega Domènech, 2023; Hall, 2023; O'Reilly, 2009, 2017). O'Reilly's ethnography of British migrants living on the Costa del Sol described a community that contrasted itself with the British society in the UK and aligned with imagined Spanish traits and lifestyles. Defined by symbolic boundaries of inclusion that are based on a shared identity as 'British but different', these communities are built around social activities, hobbies, and volunteering, that enable migrants to achieve status and belonging at the margins of mainstream Spanish society (Fàbrega Domènech, 2023; O'Reilly, 2000,

2020). Amongst these groups are those who identify as animal lovers, particularly regarding cats and dogs, and who are committed to helping animals in need (Hill, 2024c; O'Reilly, 2020).

To contextualize the current ethnography, the College of Veterinarians of Málaga and the charity, *Felina Málaga*, coordinate efforts to spay and neuter (desex) the Torremolinos colony cats, supported by funds from the city council (Rivas, 2023; Woodward, 2025). However, daily feeding is undertaken by local volunteers. As a group, Brits living along the Costa del Sol occupy a liminal space between tourist and resident (Fàbrega-Domènech, 2019; Hall, 2023; Marí-Klose & Calzada, 2024; O'Reilly, 2003). Similarly, free-living cats are neither 'pets' nor wildlife, living independently within humans-dominated communities (Crowley et al., 2020; Jaroš, 2021). Thus, the Torremolinos colony represents a space of both transnational and transspecies community building, the latter being the focus of this study.

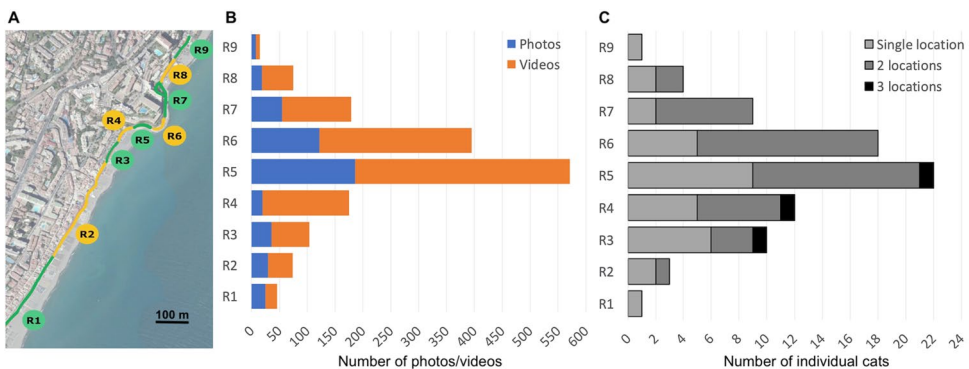
## Methods

### Ethical statement

Research was conducted in accordance with the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA) 'Ethical Guidelines for good research practice' (ASA, 2021), and approved by faculty members of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové, May 2024.

### Fieldnotes and data collection

Fieldwork was conducted during May–June 2024, with notes, photos, and video footage used to document the daily lives of cats inhabiting a 1.6km stretch of the Torremolinos promenade (Figure 1a). Data includes 505 photos and 1131 video clips, ranging from 1–125 s, with a median length of 11 s. Cats were identified and assigned



**Figure 1.** Regions where data was collected, and number of individual cats sighted at each site. (a) The walk along 1.6km of the Torremolinos promenade is divided into 9 regions (R1–R9), based on where groups of cats congregate and feeding sites. (b) The X axis shows the number of total photos (blue) and videos (orange) taken within each region. (c) The X axis shows the number of individual cats observed within each region. The total cat count exceeds 56 because some cats were sighted at two (darker grey) or three (black) locations.

a name primarily based on their colour and markings, or other prominent features. By utilising an identification chart and re-examining multiple frames and co-sightings, a robust identification system was developed. Those cats whose distinguishing features are only subtly different, potentially causing instances of unclear or misidentification, are indicated in [Table 1](#).

In total, 56 cats were documented. Of these, 15 individuals were observed during over half of the outings (13/25) ([Table 1](#)). By applying the same identification chart to images collected during fieldwork from February 2022 (Hill, 2024c), cats who were present two years prior are also indicated ([Table 1](#), February 2022). The fieldwork data was supplemented by searching YouTube for videos filmed along the Torremolinos promenade, with key words ['Cat' + 'Torremolinos'] or ['Cat' + 'La Carihuella']. A total of 13 relevant videos published between 2008 and 2021 were retrieved, and the featured cats compared to the identification chart described above. Those cats present prior to 2021 are indicated in [Table 1](#), based on identification in YouTube videos (V) or an individual cat's history shared by interlocutors (I) during the fieldwork.

Data collected is concentrated between region 4 (R4) and region 7 (R7) ([Table 1](#); [Figure 1](#)). Region 5 (R5) and region 6 (R6) include the cliff face where many cats sleep ([Figure 1b](#)). Furthermore, the licensed feeders put food down each evening in R4, R5, R6, and R7, which resulted in a lot of cat activity during these periods. It is likely that I missed cats at the furthest end of my range (R8), where I spent less time. However, I passed through the region 1 (R1) and region 2 (R2) multiple times each day as I left and returned to my accommodation, and less data here represents a lower feline presence.

### ***Thematic analysis***

While collecting data, I engaged with the concept of interspecies intersubjectivity (and joint meaning-making) by recording how different cats interacted with each other, with me, other humans, and their environment (Aaltola & International Association for Environmental Philosophy, 2013; Hurn, 2012; Madden, 2014; Smuts, 2006; Young, 2013). An Excel Spreadsheet was used to create a searchable record of the time and locations of photos, videos, and associated fieldnotes. These were subsequently used to identify individual cats (as described above) and linked to additional comments and observations arising from post-fieldwork analysis. During this process I paid particular attention to feline and human behaviours, and the inter- and intra-specific relationships within the context of the wider environment. To view these interactions through a less anthropocentric lens, I contemplated the feline perspective when reviewing my data and gave equal consideration to the agency of feline subjects in social interactions.

I applied a thematic analysis approach that borrows from phenomenological inquiry and attempts to understand lived experiences and interspecies intersubjectivity (Neubauer et al., 2019). Thematic analysis within more-than-human ethnography has proven a valuable approach to understanding the complexity of wildlife tourism from different perspectives (Bertella et al., 2025; Thomsen et al., 2023). The thematic approach allows meaning to be derived from the diverse and rich datasets that arise from multispecies ethnographic inquiry by focusing on patterns within predefined

**Table 1.** Location and encounters with individual cats.

Name assigned	Potential ID issues <sup>a</sup>	Regions (Figure 1a)	Outings (out of 25)	% Outings	Days (out of 9)	February 2022	Pre-2022 <sup>b</sup>
Tabby Tux 1		R1	13	52%	6	Yes	V
Jimmy		R2	12	48%	7	Yes	V
Gray Tortie		R2; R3	3	12%	3		
Ginger Tux 3		R2	1	4%	1		
Tabby Rincon		R3	16	64%	8	Yes	
Black cat 4	a, b	R3; R4; R5	12	48%	7		
Black cat 2		R3; R4	12	48%	9	Yes	
Tabby Gray		R3	11	44%	8		
Black cat 1	a	R3	9	36%	7	Yes	
Tabby 1		R3; R4	9	36%	6		
Ginger Tux 1		R3	6	24%	6		
Tabby Tux 2		R3	5	20%	4		
B&W Tux 4		R3	2	8%	2		
B&W1		R4; R5	14	56%	8	Yes	V
Black cat 3	a	R4; R5	12	48%	9		V
B&W Tux 3		R4; R5	11	44%	6	Yes	
B&W Tux 2		R4	9	36%	8		
Ginger Tux 2		R4	7	28%	4		
Calico Tux		R4	5	20%	5		V
Cream 2		R4	5	20%	4		
B&W2		R4; R5	4	16%	4		
Tabby R	d	R4	2	8%	2		
Tabby Hat		R5	20	80%	8		
B&W Tux 1		R5	18	72%	9	Yes	V
Tabby 2	d	R5	17	68%	8		
Ginger 4B		R5; R6	17	68%	8	Yes	V
Black Hat		R5; R6	13	52%	8		
Ginger 2B	c	R5; R6	11	44%	9		
Ginger 4A		R5; R6	10	40%	6		V
Tabby M	d	R5	10	40%	9		
Princess		R5	10	40%	8	Yes	V
Tabby Not		R5	8	32%	5		
Ginger Patches		R5; R6	9	36%	7		
Tabby Calico		R5; R6	6	24%	5		
Tabby Swirl	d	R5	5	20%	5	Yes	
Black cat 5	b	R5	5	20%	4		
Black cat 6	b	R5; R6	5	20%	4		
Ginger 2A	c	R5; R6	5	20%	3		
Ginger 5		R5	4	16%	4		
Fisherman Friend		R6; R7	20	80%	8	Yes	I, V
Ginger 3		R6; R7	17	68%	9	Yes	V
Black cat 7		R6; R7	16	64%	9	Yes	I, V
Siamese		R6; R7	14	56%	9	Yes	
Ginger 1		R6	14	56%	8	Yes	
Cream 1		R6	14	56%	7		
Ginger 6		R6	13	52%	8		
B&W3		R6; R7	12	48%	6	Yes	
Tabby 3		R7; R8	11	44%	8		
Grey		R7	10	40%	7		
Fluffy Puff		R7	9	36%	6		
Tabby Old		R8	11	44%	6		I
Tabby 5		R6	8	32%	8		
Tabby 4		R6	7	28%	5		
Black cat 8		R7; R8	8	32%	5		
Tabby Patchwork		R8	5	20%	4		
Ginger 7		R9	3	12%	3		

<sup>a</sup>Letters correspond to possible misidentification amongst similar individuals.

<sup>b</sup>Evidence from interlocutor accounts (I) or identified on YouTube videos (V) prior to 2022.

themes. The primary goal here was to describe these within the context of three thematic threads related to, (1) Feline agency within a transspecies community, (2) the practices of feeding and care, and (3) cat-tourist interactions. Through an iterative

process, codes were developed for patterns of feline and human behaviours and vocalisations. Prominent codes were as follows: cat-initiated interactions, human-avoidance behaviours, people petting/handling cats, feline consent/assent, feline dissent, feeding of cats, littering by cat feeders, expressions of joy, sadness, or indifference at seeing cats, anti-cat sentiments, people admiring cats, people photographing/filming cats, cats relaxing in human presence, cats inside bars/restaurant areas, injured/sick cats, cats hissing/growling, cats meowing, and cat-cat interactions (play, rest, companionship, disputes).

## Results and discussion

### *Theme 1: Feline agency within a transspecies community*

Along the Torremolinos promenade, transspecies community-building is evident in how the feline presence shaped human behaviour and ultimately the landscape. For example, a fence has been erected around fallen rocks, but with gaps specifically designed to allow the cats continued access to their homes in the cliff face. The cats also use this space to retreat from unwanted human attention. Several of the cats have become associated with specific restaurants, where they are fed by the staff, as well as enjoying scraps dropped on the floor or offered by guests. Cats exerted their agency in choosing to patron a particular premises, and in some cases have been present longer than the current management. For example, an elderly cat spends her days lazing in the sun outside a seafront kiosk that sells ice-cream, drinks, and snacks. The current vendor tells me she has been around longer than him, and in the winter will sleep inside the kiosk. Likewise, the cat shown in [Figure 2](#) is never far from his chosen bar/restaurant, and is often seen sitting with diners, or sleeping on a ledge just out of human reach. These cats are very much a part of the social landscape, and some are featured in TripAdvisor reviews as being one of the highlights of the visit (Hill, 2024c).

Transspecies ethnography challenges anthropocentrism by considering how agency and interactions between more-than-human individuals shape society and landscapes (Chakraborty, 2021). However, a criticism of using non-hierarchical frameworks as a sociological lens is it does not fully appreciate the power differentials that invariably exist, and how these limit the agency of members of other species. To address this, Wilkie (2015, p. 330) prescribed 'a more contextualised understanding of interspecies relations that considers where species are located in a network and any power differentials that may exist', thus adding 'more texture and depth to multispecies networks'. Non-human agency exists within the power dynamics of a human-dominated landscape. This is most evident in respect to desexing (spaying and neutering), a practice which humans determine to be in the cats' best interest. With May–June being peak kitten-season, the absence of kittens was most notable. All cats identified had a clipped ear, indicating they had been spayed or neutered (a common practice to avoid unnecessary capturing) and many appear to be long-time residents ([Table 1](#)).

While overpopulation is problematic from a feline welfare perspective, the practice of spaying and neutering is not simply about preventing unwanted (from the human perspective) pregnancies. The more extensive surgeries are designed to 'desexualize animal bodies, and in addition, to produce particular behavioural changes: placidity,



**Figure 2.** Patron cat associated with a particular bar/restaurant. Example of a cat who is always seen at the same location, either sat outside this bar/restaurant (left image), sat under a table (bottom right), on a chair, or on a ledge above the stairs leading to guest toilets (top right). Photos taken by author, June 2024.

docility, less tendency to roam and a slackening in territoriality (and accompanying habits, like urinating on the furniture)' (Palmer et al., 2001, p. 357). Essentially, desexing makes cats 'better pets', and I have argued elsewhere that, 'under a Foucauldian framework the repression of his sexual behaviour renders a cat 'productive' in that he better fits into the social construct of a companion animal' (Hill, 2024b, p. 91). Neutering also influences the behaviour of urban free-living cats, reducing noise caused by fighting and smell from urine (Cafazzo et al., 2019; Finkler & Terkel, 2010). Although the Torremolinos colony cats do not live in human homes, their behaviour is more akin to companion cats than those typically observed amongst urban colony cats (Finka, 2022; Turner, 2021; Vitale, 2022). Many of the cats living along the promenade exhibited affiliative behaviours towards humans and will initiate physical contact with strangers. Of the cats documented in this study, only 14% were timid towards strangers. The remainder either tolerated human proximity (32%) or initiated physical contact (54%).

Desexing of cats also tends to result in reduced territorial ranges and lower migration (Cafazzo et al., 2019; Finkler et al., 2011). Along the Torremolinos promenade, cats were observed in the same small territorial ranges (Figure 1c), and several individuals have been present for years (Table 1). By re-examining fieldwork images from February 2022 (Hill, 2024c), I was able to identify 17 cats who were also encountered in 2024. Likewise, several individuals are known by licensed feeders to have been around since at least 2020. Many cats are also identifiable online in YouTube videos going back several years (Table 1). Younger cats were

often together with one or more members of small 'play groups' of 3–5 cats who regularly interacted outside of feeding time. Several cats appear to have established long-standing affiliative bonds, often seen together as bonded pairs. For example, a large tabby male (Tabby Rincon) is often close to a more timid and smaller cat (Tabby Tux 2). The larger cat appears protective of the smaller one, although both are part of a larger group that hangs out behind a restaurant (R3). Some members of this group are bolder and overlap into R2 and R4, whereas others are only confident interacting with humans they know, and retreat to more private areas outside of feeding time. Likewise, several of the cats inhabiting R7, predominantly those who spent most of their time in the bush area behind a bar/restaurant, were timid towards human strangers. However, the cats frequently encountered in the pedestrian-heavy areas of R4 through to R6 were highly social with each other and humans. Only 10 of the 56 cats (18%) appeared to be mostly loners, rarely or never seen interacting with other cats. Five of these cats inhabited the busy R1 and R2 stretch of the promenade and were exceptionally at ease with crowds and loud human activities.

These cats behave and interact with humans in a manner more aligned to companion cats who are used to human company than street-living cats who befriend caretakers but remain wary of strangers. This human-friendliness no doubt endears them to visitors and lends to them being viewed and treated as 'community pets'. In this respect, the Torremolinos colony represents a humano-cat culture more than it does a street-cat culture (Jaroš, 2018).

## ***Theme 2: Feeding as care, spectacle, and conflict***

Food and feeding are central to humano-cat cultures and relationships with companion animal species. Human-initiated relationships often involve edible offerings, received in return for attention and affection. Torremolinos City Council issues licences to individuals to feed free-living cats within a specific area. The cats living along the promenade are attended daily by two licensed feeders, who provide wet and dry cat food and refill water bowls. Medications or treatments are administered for existing ailments, and new injuries or non-emergency ailments are also noted for reporting to a veterinarian who oversees the colony. The feeders are a British-born woman, and her male Spanish friend, both in their senior years. Both have cats of their own, and their love for the colony cats are evident in how they talk about, interact with, and care for them.

The licenced feeders come by in the early evening and park their hand-pushed trolley at four locations, representing distinct feeding groups. The cats begin to congregate in anticipation around dinner time, with more emerging as the food cart approaches. The increased feline presence draws attention and crowds (Figure 3). Although not formalised in the same way, the spectacle is not dissimilar to 'feeding time at the zoo', where visitors gather to watch keepers feed specific groups of animals (Boksberger et al., 2010; Hill, 2021). In the zoo context this offers an edutainment (education through entertainment) opportunity (Carr & Cohen, 2011). Likewise, this interest in the cats presents an opportunity that could be capitalised on to increase awareness and encourage empathy for unowned cats in the region and elsewhere.



**Figure 3.** Feeding time crowds. Photo taken by author, June 2024.



**Figure 4.** 'Do not feed the cats' sign. Cats laid out on the grassy area (R4, Figure 1) where a sign from *Málaga Felina* is located (Insert). Photo taken by author, June 2024.

Feeding is also a source of conflict and potential harm. Despite signs explaining the cats are fed regularly and asking people not to feed them (Figure 4), residents and visitors continue to put food down. Sometimes this is cat food bought specifically for the purpose, other times it is human leftovers. The former can create a littering problem when tin and wrapping are left with food in them for the cats to finish later. Likewise, food left directly on the grass can mould and attracts parasites that are bad for both the grass and the cats. The cats' health is also compromised by inappropriate food. The licensed feeders assert they do not mind other people feeding the cats, providing it is cat food and they do not litter or leave the food to rot on the grass. Piles of dry food left along the promenade wall is a common sight too. Several unlicensed feeders appear convinced their good deed is necessary for the survival of the cats and expressed resentment towards the council rules about not feeding. Others just seem to enjoy feeding the animals, and the message on the 'do not feed the cats' sign for the most part is ignored.

### **Theme 3: Not so wild pets (cat-tourist interactions)**

Expressions of sadness that the cats have no home exemplify a prominently held belief that cats are domesticated animals who do not thrive without human care, love, and protection (Hill, 2022; Slater et al., 2008; Vasileva & McCulloch, 2024). However, the cats along the promenade are loved by those who feed them and visit them regularly, and for some this has been their home for many years (Table 1). Conversely, I overheard several versions of 'They just have the best life!', which is arguably not entirely true either. The cats do get sick from being fed inappropriate foods, as well as being prone to the same ailments as companion cats, especially as they age. My informant said several cats have been injured in the last year by cyclists and scooters riding too fast around the bend. Furthermore, the feeders expressed anger and sadness that cats are abandoned there on a semi-regular basis.

There are multiple senior cats, and a couple looked visibly unwell. One such cat was on a vet-recommended liquid diet, and I overheard more than one comment about her condition. However, it is also a concern that her poor condition, and that of other senior cats, gives the impression that the cats all live poorly. This says a lot about how old or sick animals are viewed by society. Naturally, people don't like seeing frail or sickly animals, but does that give us the right to pity them, hide them away, or even euthanise them? Of course, there are strong opinions and caveats regarding acceptable levels of suffering, and the feasibility of caring for older cats within a colony. However, as a colony ages the individual needs will invariably increase. Furthermore, desexed cats are more prone to obesity (Gunther et al., 2018; Larsen, 2017), and over-feeding from multiple sources was apparent.

The phrase 'they are wild cats' was as prevalent as the phrase 'they are homeless', and neither is true. These cats do not live within human homes, but they are socialised members of a domesticated species—neither a wild species, nor wild-like in their behaviours. It irks my informant to hear them referred to as wild cats, and during feeding time she will correct people by explaining they are actually 'pet cats'. This can be confusing as it leads to the misunderstanding that they have human homes they go back to, or that they are all her cats. However, most are stray or abandoned companion cats. Some are more human-friendly than many house cats, which makes them distinct from street-born cats and those inhabiting more rural locations. Probably the most notable observation was how many tourists openly expressed joy at seeing these cats. I overheard several variations of the exclamation 'Oh look, another kitty'. People of all ages, genders, and various nationalities could be seen doting over the cats. Every day I observed individuals or groups taking photographs or filming one or more of the cats or attempting to get their attention (Figure 5). Organic conversations arose from people acknowledging my own activities (watching, recording, or interacting with the cats), typically initiated with comments such as 'oh you love cats!—me too!'

Analysis of TripAdvisor comments from bars, restaurants, and hotels along the Torremolinos seafront revealed a minority sentiment that local cats were an unsightly and unwelcome presence (Hill, 2024c). The observation that the cats were unafraid and friendly towards visitors corroborated the assertion that most residents and visitors are neutral or pro-cat. Apart from one woman hissing and stamping her



**Figure 5.** A cat ‘posing’ for a photograph. Photo taken by author, June 2024.

foot at a passing cat, I did not witness maliciousness directed toward any of the cats. In fact, the friendliness and lack of fear exhibited by many of the cats would indicate they experienced little or no ill-treatment from humans. One evening I was sat on a step with a cat curled up next to me, when a family group approached and acknowledged the cat’s presence. Upon seeing the cat, a middle-aged man in the group said to me in a British Midlands accent, ‘I know luv, I’m an animal lover too’. This appears to be the overriding sentiment. A common theme is that holidaymakers were reminded of their own cats back home whom they missed. For example, a young boy and his mother appeared equally enamoured with a particular cat, who they said reminded them of their own. The mother told me she was taking photos to send to the grandmother who was looking after their cat at home in England.

As a researcher, the way I interact with non-human participants is something I have given serious consideration too. Issues related to consent have been problematized and considered in a range of context, from wildlife tourism, captive wildlife, and domestic species used in tourism (Fennell & Guo, 2023; Speiran & Hovorka, 2024; Szydlowski, 2022). Fennell (2022) argued that sled dogs can and do consent, and developed a framework by which their emotions, individual preferences, behaviours, and physical state can be read as consent or non-consent. Consensual interactions with cats require an elementary understanding of feline behavior and attention to subtle cues. However, human exceptionalism and commodification of companion animals underpins entitlement or dismissal of the animal’s feelings on the matter. Some people did attempt to ensure the cat was consenting to physical contact, often encouraging the cat to come to them with ‘pspsps’ or at least being mindful of the cat’s reaction as they approached. Others took liberties, seemingly oblivious to the fact a cat may not wish to be petted or picked up. Nonetheless, many cats tolerated handling, and some even appeared to welcome such attention. Others, while tolerating proximity, were adept at manoeuvring out of reach of overly grabby humans. My observations were unavoidably focused towards the most sociable felines who made their presence known. Timid cats could be observed hiding in the bushes or coming out only in the presence of their known feeders. One such cat would only eat if her bowl was placed up on a high ledge, and if a tourist got too close would back off. However, this cat was not unsocialised, and similar levels of timidity or lack of

confidence around strangers is also seen in companion cats (Hill, 2024a; Wedl et al., 2011).

## Conclusion

The humano-cat culture of the Torremolinos promenade is one of feline sociality and predominantly positive engagement with pro-cat locals and visitors. While the cats live outside of human homes, their disposition, and relations within the community positions them as 'community pets' rather than 'street' or 'community cats'. I determined the Torremolino colony represents a humano-cat culture more than a street-cat culture (Jaroš, 2018). Nonetheless, these cats occupy a liminal space within a transspecies community comprised of tourists, residential tourists, retirement migrants, and Spanish-born residents. The observation that cat feeders of Spanish and British origin collaborate, suggests further research could build upon O'Reilly's work on transnational identity and community building among British expatriates in Spain (O'Reilly, 2000). This would entail developing and testing the concept of transspecies community-building within a framework of transnational identity and attitudes towards free-roaming cats. To this end, future research plans would include qualitative interviews and focus groups with cat feeders, business owners, community members, and veterinarians, and quantitative surveys of tourist and resident attitudes towards the cats.

While problems related to inappropriate or overfeeding, injury, and age-related illness are apparent, the Torremolinos promenade colony arguably represent a success story in terms of population management, provisioning, and acceptance of feline community members. Although considered as animal welfare initiatives, Spain is one of several European countries that provide government-level financial support for colony cat projects (Natoli et al., 2019). However, community cat projects can be framed as a form of social inclusion, caring, and community-building in the more-than-human city (McDonald et al., 2018; Warawutsunthon, 2021). Potentially they could also be considered within a social tourism context. Social tourism refers to tourism policies that prescribes mechanisms through which governments can achieve social objectives, such as increased citizen wellbeing and social inclusion, as well as contributing to a more sustainable visitor economy (McCabe & Qiao, 2020). However, the allocation of government funds has created tensions amongst various stakeholders along the Costa del Sol, especially between tourism sector businesses and in relation to the quantity and quality of employment opportunities for residents (Bianchi et al., 2023).

A lack of support is known to take a toll on cat carers, who dedicate considerable time and effort, are invested emotionally and financially, and carry the burden of not being able to do enough for the cats (Gunther et al., 2016). Torremolinos' licenced cat feeders pay out of pocket and are not permitted to ask for donations. However, several tourists indicated they would like to offer small financial contributions, suggesting colony caretakers could be supported by visitor donations. Furthermore, the Torremolinos City Council recently signed an agreement to support education, veterinary, and social support for free-living cats in the area, including adoption of kittens and socialised adults (Serrano, 2024). It will be interesting to document how this develops as part of an ongoing longitudinal study.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Kristine Hill**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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