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ISSN: 0892-7936 (Print) 1753-0377 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfan20

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To cite this article: Kristine Hill, Michelle Szydlowski & Sarah Oxley Heaney (19 Nov 2026): Shared Space and Place: Community Cats and Emerging Humano–Cat Cultures in Sauraha, Nepal, Anthrozoös, DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2026.2739052

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2026.2739052

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Published online: 19 Nov 2026.

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ANTHROZOÖS
https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2026.2739052

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Shared Space and Place: Community Cats and Emerging Humano–Cat Cultures in Sauraha, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamic nature of the human–companion animal bond and interspecies relations between humans (*Homo sapiens*) and free-roaming domestic cats (*Felis catus*) within the cultural context of Sauraha, Nepal. To better understand the status of domestic cats and cat–human relations in communities increasingly influenced by Western ideas through globalization, tourism, and wildlife conservation efforts, a thematic approach was adopted to analyze multispecies ethnographic data. The study included 52 resident human informants who participated as individuals and groups in 27 qualitative interviews. The data are described in terms of cultural co-creation within multispecies communities, feline agency, and integration into human spaces and an emerging role of companion cats as commodities and kin. A total of 63 cats were documented and assigned codes based on their relationality to humans and human-constructed places: "Space" for cats who lived outside of or on the periphery of human-defined places, "Place" for cats who appeared more strongly associated with a particular human-constructed place, such as a communal dwelling, restaurant, or hotel, and "Person" for cats who demonstrated a connection to a particular human who might be defined as their guardian or primary caretaker. These relational categories highlighted the blurred and ambiguous boundaries between definitions, and in many cases represented a liminal or transitional state. Therefore, the discrete codes were reframed as a Space-Place-Person spectrum of cat–human interrelatedness that describes Umwelten transitions (changing environmental perceptions) and an emerging humano–cat culture (the culture of pet-keeping). This study highlights the changing relationships between cats and humans occupying shared spaces and explores how cats exert agency in the co-creation of "Place" (space imbued with meaning) within multispecies communities.

KEYWORDS

Anthrozoology; cat–human relations; *Felis catus*; human–animal interaction; humano–cat; Nepal

The benefits and challenges of living with companion animal species in the Global North are relatively well-documented in academic literature (e.g., Fox & Gee, 2019; Herzog, 2011, 2014; Mein & Grant, 2018; Nast, 2006; O'Haire, 2010; Ritvo, 1987), but less so in the Global

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2026.2739052.
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South,[1] where Western concepts of "pet-keeping"[2] and companion animal "ownership"[3] are relatively new (Acharya et al., 2019; Mahato et al., 2020). This is likely due to a difference in historical and cultural perspectives on companion animals. For example, dogs (*Canis familiaris*) have historically been accepted as a "free-living" (unowned) species, often without permanent bonds to a human kin group, where individual dogs retain their agency to wander, hunt/scavenge, and sleep (Range & Marshall-Pescini, 2022). Cats (*Felis catus*) were unknown (at least to outsiders) in villages surrounding Nepal's Chitwan National Park prior to 2017 (personal and participant observations 2017, 2022, 2025); however, populations are seemingly expanding (Szydlowski et al., 2026).

Chitwan National Park is a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot, whose conservation successes include anti-poaching programs and endangered species recovery (Government of Nepal, 2015). Thanks to these successes, the Chitwan area hosts up to 150,000 tourists per year, promoting the flow of diverse cultural perspectives to the area (Szydlowski, 2024). Western tourists often express joy at seeing healthy, happy cats in touristic areas but are disturbed by sick or abused animals (Hart, 2019; Hill, 2024a, 2025; Mameno & Kubo, 2021; Swain, 2020; Tully & Carr, 2023). However, tourists who visit areas for the wildlife may see "feral" cats and dogs less favorably if they are considered a potential threat to wildlife (Medina et al., 2016). In an area where tourists outnumber locals by a factor greater than 57:1 (Government of Nepal, 2015), the perspectives of tourists can have a major impact on local practices. Likewise, cultural differences regarding management strategies and welfare perceptions of free-living animals ("unowned" or street-dwelling cats and dogs) can also create friction between visitors, residents, and local and foreign-run animal charities (Beckman et al., 2014; Blaer, 2023; Chan, 2016; Hart, 2019; Mameno & Kubo, 2021; Ruiz-Izaguirre et al., 2012; Strickland, 2015; Swain, 2020). Therefore, understanding both feline and human needs, wants, and desires within a specific cultural context is imperative for harmonious multispecies coexistence. Here we primarily focus on understanding the changing perspectives of local residents,[4] which were inevitably shaped by tourism.

This multispecies ethnographic study focuses on community (unowned) cats and an emerging humano–cat culture (the culture surrounding companion cats and their relationships with humans) (Jaroš, 2018) in Nepal. We highlight the ongoing changing relationships between cats and humans occupying shared spaces and explore how cats exert agency in the co-creation of culture within multispecies communities. We describe Umwelt transitions (Tønnessen, 2009), feline agency, and the position of the cat within multispecies communities that are increasingly influenced by Western ideas through globalization, tourism, and wildlife conservation efforts. Space and Place are distinct but interconnected concepts in human geography. Space is an abstract, objective, and physical location, while Place is Space that has been imbued with meaning, value, and human experience (e.g., Kudryavtsev et al., 2012; Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2024; Till & Robinson, 2025; Tuan, 1975, 1979). Recognizing that more-than-human animals possess subjective minds and engage in interspecies intersubjectivity and joint meaning-making (e.g., Aaltola, 2013; Alger & Alger, 1997; Hill, 2024b; Hurn, 2012a; Smuts, 2006; Young, 2013), we extend the concept of Place to include feline experiences and cat–human co-creation of meaning.

We endeavor to understand the relationships and bonds formed between humans and cats who share Space and Place, and how cats are integrating into communities, homes, and family life. In doing so, we are cognizant of not superimposing "Western" notions of companion animals and "pet-keeping." We seek to avoid the pitfall of nineteenth-century anthropologists who conceptualized kinship "as a way in which people everywhere cope culturally with the universal natural processes of procreation" (Holy, 1996, p. 3), essentially using "Western" notions of "family" as a framework to formulate cross-cultural understandings of kinship bonds. The "procreation model" began losing favor as kinship studies instead turned to specific cultural conceptualizations of kinship (Holy, 1996; Read, 2007; Schneider & Shimizu, 1992). This shift was led by Schneider (1984), who is critical of the ethnocentric view and argues that kinship can only be understood from the perspective of a given culture (not superimposing terms and interpreting relationships through a "Western" lens). Thus, we applied a similar approach to studying relationships and bonds with companion animal species (cats and dogs), which may not follow the paternalistic and commodification patterns that typify human–companion animal relations and "pet-keeping" cultures in the Global North (Fox & Gee, 2019; Herzog, 2014; Nast, 2006; Ritvo, 1987).

Methods

The research plan was reviewed and accepted by the Miami University Research Ethics and Integrity program, certificate #04943e (11/19/2024). Data include unstructured interviews, focus groups, and fieldnotes from all three researchers, taken during December 2024 and January 2025, supplemented by 151 photographs (62 featuring cats) and video recordings of 112 discrete events (42 included cats) (see Table 1). Human and feline participants were chosen using purposive sampling, with a focus on those interacting with the "other" species. Human participants were approached, offered an information sheet in English and Nepali, and oral-informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Seeking oral consent is typical in the area, as indigenous people are often hesitant to sign official-looking forms (see Szydlowski, 2024). Researchers observed feline participants from a respectful distance but did not interact unless the cat approached and initiated contact.

Our study included 18 female participants (16 Nepalese, 1 South Korean, 1 Dutch) and 34 male participants (all Nepalese), who were sometimes interviewed in pairs or groups at their place of business or residence (Table 1). Participants represented a range of Nepali ethnic groups and were either from Sauraha or surrounding rural areas, or were long-term residents. Occupations included safari tour guides, hotel and restaurant managers/owners, staff, shop and small business owners, local teachers, veterinarians, animal rescuers and veterinary clinic staff, and mahouts.

Interviews denoted as "arranged" in Table 1 were set up in advance, either by contacting participants directly or by using a translator who arranged for us to visit the individual or family. Impromptu interviews were spontaneous, and for this reason, they were typically shorter. While English is spoken by many Sauraha residents (Government of Nepal, 2021), several interviews were facilitated by translators (Table 1) for a variety of reasons. First, we wanted to collect information on the terms used by locals in describing

Table 1. Types of visual and audio data collected and where they were obtained from.

	Photo data	Video data (excluding those supplemental to interviews)		Interview data (all 2025) (+P) Indicates supplemental photo data (+V) Indicates additional video footage		
Location (see Figure 1)	*Cats/ total	Discrete events: *Cats/ total	Combined length (mm: ss)	Interview date length (hh: mm:ss)	Human demographics: Female (F)/male (M), nationality. Occupation. Arranged/ impromptu. Translator present.	Species discussed
Hotel 1		1/1	02:16	13 Jan 00:40:30 (+P), (+V)	F, South Korean & M, Nepalese. Married couple and hotel owners/managers. Arranged. No translator.	Cat
Hotel 2		1/1	00:37	00:01:09 (+V)	F, Nepalese. Hotel staff. Impromptu. No translator.	Dog
Hotel 3	0/5	0/5	04:11	12 Jan 00:59:48	F & M, Nepalese. Married couple and hotel owners/managers. Arranged. No translator.	Cat & dog
Restaurant 1	32/36	10/11	32:36	9 Jan 00:11:05 (+V)	M, Nepalese. Resident member of staff. Arranged. No translator.	Cat
				10 Jan 00:05:50 (+V)	M, Nepalese. Member of staff. Impromptu. No translator.	Cat
Restaurant 2	7/8	4/5	20:50	9 Jan 00:10:30 (+V)	3 × M, Nepalese. Kitchen staff. Impromptu. No translator.	Cat
Bar/restaurant 1		1/1	02:00	15 Jan 00:01:21 (+P), (+V)	F & M, Nepalese. Staff. Impromptu. No translator.	Cat & dog
Bar/restaurant 2	8/8	4/6	20:49			
Bar/restaurant 3	2/5	4/7	17:24	14 Jan (a) 00:24:00 (+P), (+V)	M, Nepalese. Local canoe guide. Impromptu. No translator.	Cat & dog
				14 Jan (b) 00:32:17 (+P), (+V)	M, Nepalese. Local teacher. Impromptu. No translator.	Cat & dog
Café/restaurant	1/2	3/4	08:12	10 Jan (a) 00:18:24 (+P), (+V)	M, Nepalese. Staff. Impromptu. No translator.	Cat & dog
				10 Jan (b) 01:28:40	3 × M, Nepalese. 1 vet, 2 students. Arranged. No translator.	Cat
Baadreni Road	3/25	1/4	09.55	13 Jan (a) 00:05:43 (+V)	F, Nepalese. Resident. Impromptu. Translator.	Dog
					M, Nepalese. Café owner.	Cat

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Location (see Figure 1)	Photo data: *Cats/ total	Video data (excluding those supplemental to interviews): Discrete events: *Cats/ total	Video data (excluding those supplemental to interviews): Combined length (mm: ss)	Interview data (all 2025) (+P) Indicates supplemental photo data (+V) Indicates additional video footage: Interview date length (hh: mm:ss)	Human demographics: Female (F)/male (M), nationality. Occupation. Arranged/ impromptu. Translator present.	Species discussed
				13 Jan (b) 00:45:15 (+P), (+V)	Arranged. No translator.	
Hotel road	0/1	0/3	02:21			
Community Forest Road	0/5					
Nature safari camp Road	0/2			11 Jan (a) 00:31:21 (+P), (+V)	M, Nepalese. Safari tour guide. Arranged. No translator.	Cat
				11 Jan (b) 00:11:35 (+P), (+V)	Nepalese family at home: Mother, father, and 2 × brothers (young adult). Impromptu. Translator.	Cat/dog
				11 Jan (c) 00:09:54 (+P), (+V)	Nepalese family at home, 2 × F (with children who were not interviewed). Impromptu. Translator.	Dog
Elephant stable (NTNC)	4/4	1/1	03:51			
NTNC				10 Jan 00:32:17	F & M, Nepalese. Both vets. Arranged. No translator.	Cat/dog
NDET office (nature guide focus group)				12 Jan 01:24:43	5 × M, 1 × F, Nepalese, Nature Guides. No translator.	Cat/dog
Sauraha Sunset Point	0/15	2/17	14:07			
Rhino Road		0/1	00:48			
Rhino Street	2/7	3/17	09:44	15 Jan 00:07:24 (+P), (+V)	Nepalese family at home: 2 × M, 3 × F (children present but not interviewed). Arranged. Translator.	Cat/dog
Laukhani Road	0/1	1/1	00:59			
Main Street	1/18	4/20	18.10	14 Jan 00:03:28 (+P), (+V)	3 × M, Nepalese. Occupation unknown. Impromptu. No translator.	Dog
				15 Jan 00:05:14 (+V)	F, Nepalese. Resident shop keeper. Impromptu. Translator.	Cat
Malpur Rd	1/4	0/2	01.04			
Street 15	0/2	0/2	00:25			
Street 22		0/1	01:48			
Village 1	0/2					
Village 2	1/1	2/2	00:42	15 Jan 00:07:22 (+P), (+V)	F, Nepalese. At home. Occupation unknown. Impromptu. Translator.	Cat/dog
Elephant breeding center (Out of town)				8 Jan 00:08:35 (+P), (+V)	F, Nepalese. Wife of mahout. Impromptu. Translator.	Cat

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Location (see Figure 1)	Photo data *Cats/ total	Video data (excluding those supplemental to interviews) Discrete events: *Cats/ total	Video data (excluding those supplemental to interviews) Combined length (mm: ss)	Interview data (all 2025) (+P) Indicates supplemental photo data (+V) Indicates additional video footage Interview date length (hh: mm:ss)	Human demographics: Female (F)/male (M), nationality. Occupation. Arranged/ impromptu. Translator present.	Species discussed
Suspension bridge (Out of town)				8 Jan 00:02:23 (+P), (+V)	M, Nepalese. Occupation unknown. Impromptu. Translator.	Dog
Anon (private residence) (Outskirts)				11 Jan 01:44:57 (+P), (+V)	F, Dutch (longtime Nepali resident). Animal rescuer/ small business owner. Arranged. No translator.	Dog (some cat)
HART Clinic (Out of town)				12 Jan 00:46:09 (+P), (+V)	1 × F, 2 × M, Nepalese. Volunteers and staff of the animal clinic. Arranged. No translator.	Dog
Pet shop (Out of town)				12 Jan 00:03:39 (+P), (+V)	M, Nepalese. Pet shop owner. Impromptu. No translator.	Cat

*The count is for data that contain images or footage of cats, not the number of individual cats at each location.

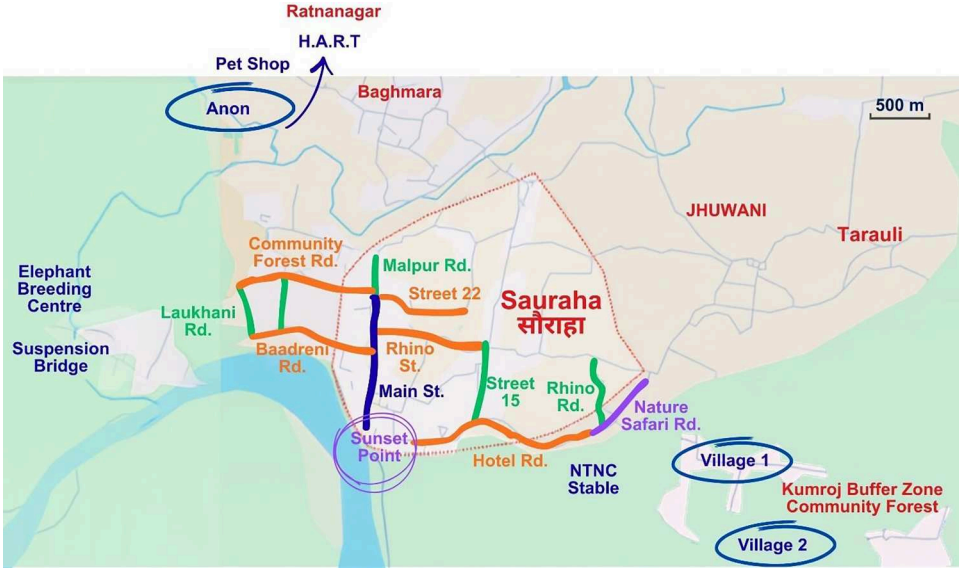


Figure 1. A map of Sauraha to introduce approximate locations indicated in Table 1, Table 2, and online Supplemental Table 1. Scale bar, 500 m.

species and individuals in the area, which necessitated translation to and from Nepali. This helped researchers avoid "planting words" in the minds of community members by introducing terms/concepts not actually used by locals (e.g., "pets," "family"). Additionally,

Table 2. Cats encountered and their assigned coding category.

Location (see Figure 1)	Dogs observed*	Cats observed*	Cat features	Coding category ">>" transitional "/" not discernible
Hotel 1	1	6	All Sauraha phenotype.	Place >> Person
Hotel 2	3	1	Sauraha phenotype.	Place
Hotel 3	0	0		
Restaurant 1	2	7	The staff say there are eight cats, and one is "wild" (a male). 3/4 adults wear collars. 3 × kittens (1 older kitten). All Sauraha phenotypes.	Place >> Person
Restaurant 2	2	5	Disabled black cat. 4 × Sauraha phenotype. No collars.	Place
Bar/Restaurant 1	1	1	Sauraha phenotype.	Place
Bar/Restaurant 2	7	6	The staff said five here. Documented six. Sauraha phenotype.	Place
Bar/Restaurant 3	9	5	Sauraha phenotype.	Place/Space
Café/Restaurant	2	0		
Baadreni Road	12	2	Slender chocolate & white.	Space/Place
		2	2 × kittens: 1 black and 1 brown & white.	Person
Community Forest Road	3	0		N/A
Elephant Stable (NTNC)	0	1	Tom cat: Sauraha phenotype.	Place >> Person
Laukhani Road	1	1	Sauraha phenotype.	Space
Main Street	17	1	Male (unfixed): Sauraha phenotype.	Person
		1	Sauraha phenotype.	Place
		2	Sauraha phenotype.	Space/Place
Malpur Road	3	1	Sauraha phenotype (but more grayish).	Place/Person
Nature Safari Camp Road	3	1	Sauraha phenotype. Sandy.	Person
Hotel Road	7	1		
Rhino Road	1	0		
Rhino Street	14	2	Sauraha phenotype.	Space/Place
		1	Sauraha phenotype.	Person
		2	Sauraha phenotype.	Place
		2	2 × kittens: Sauraha phenotype.	Place/Person
Sunset Point	6	0		
		1	Tabby & white.	Space
		1	Black cat.	Space
Street 15	1	0		

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Location (see Figure 1)	Dogs observed*	Cats observed*	Cat features	Coding category ">>" transitional "/" not discernible
Street 22	1	0		
Village 1	4	6	2 × kittens: Sauraha phenotype. 2 × kittens: tabby and white. 2 × adults: Sauraha phenotype.	Place >> Person
		1	Sauraha phenotype.	Space
Village 2	2	0		
Suspension Bridge (outskirts)	1	0		
Elephant breeding center (outskirts)	0	1	Sauraha phenotype.	Place >> Person
Anon (private residence) (outskirts)	5	1	Sauraha phenotype.	Space
HART clinic (out of town)	8	0		
Pet shop (out of town)	2	1	Persian-like kitten.	Person

*The numbers correspond to individuals of each species observed at each location.

interlocutors are often more comfortable speaking in their local language, especially for emotional expressions and nuanced ideas (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011). Interviews were unstructured, and questions were guided by context, profession, and positions held within the community (veterinarian, tour guide, restaurant staff, etc.). However, these were centered on experiences, perspectives, and opinions regarding cats in their communities or cats kept as companion animals.

Observational data were recorded and inventoried with the following information: filename, researcher, day, time, location, and any association with an interview, focus group, or field note observation. Individual cats' distinguishing features were recorded, including their location, observed behaviors, and any related discourse or additional information. This included coat color, distinguishing markings, notable features (including injuries and pedigree-like traits), approximate age (kitten, young, elderly), and sex (where determinable). Interviews were transcribed, and accompanying footage was cross-referenced for use during contextual analysis.

We took a holistic coding approach for the large body of qualitative data collected: a process whereby a single identifier is "applied to each large unit of data in the corpus to capture a sense of the overall contents and the possible categories that may develop" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 141). The data were first coded as being directly or indirectly related to "cat," "dog," or "cat + dog," based on direct observations (footage of a cat) or species-related narratives within interviews. Several interviews were centered on cats, but other interviews with sections that alluded to cats were similarly coded for cat-related content, including cat-related stories and superstitions. The data coded "dog" exclusively related to dogs or dog–human relationships and were set aside to be independently sub-coded and analyzed (Szydlowski et al., 2026).

Cat-related observations and discourses were coded as "Space," "Place," or "Person," depending upon their relationality to humans and human-constructed places. Space and Place are distinct but interconnected concepts in human geography. The "Space" code was applied to cats appearing to live on the periphery of human-defined places but not fully integrating into human-centered communities (or places). Cats were coded "Place" where a strong association with a particular human-constructed place emerged, such as a communal dwelling, restaurant, or hotel. "Person" was reserved for cats who demonstrated a connection to a particular human, perhaps defined as their guardian (or primary caretaker).

We applied a thematic approach to analyzing the data, which borrows from phenomenological inquiry and attempts to understand and incorporate lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Rather than attempting to explain discrete observations in terms of underlying causal mechanisms, this approach first seeks to appropriately visualize and describe the newly discovered phenomena (Staiti, 2012). By focusing on patterns within broadly defined themes, meaning can be derived from the diverse and rich datasets that arise from unstructured interviews, fieldwork observations, and interactions (Ayress, 2008; Gibbs, 2012).

Data management and Level 1 coding (coding for "Cat" and then "Space," "Place," and "Person") was undertaken by KH. Together with MS and SOH, observations and recurring patterns were discussed, and codes defined and refined (online Supplemental Table 1). In analyzing interview transcripts, we closely examined how humans talked

about cats, their relationships with cats, as well as commentary related to cat–human interactions they had witnessed or heard stories about. These were triangulated with observational data of cat behaviors and cat–human interactions, which also included spatial, temporal, and acoustic contexts. Together, these were examined and described as multispecies co-creation of Place and an emerging humano–cat culture (the culture of pet-keeping).

Results

We recognize our analysis is limited as only socialized cats who are comfortable around humans, especially unknown humans, may make their presence known (Bradshaw et al., 1999; Vitale, 2022). However, we identified 63 distinct individuals, including fleeting observations of more elusive felines (Table 2). Many of these cats (49/63) were of a slender, relatively small build, short-haired, with tabby or spotted markings over a tan or grayish undercoat that we dubbed the "Sauraha phenotype" (see Figure 2). Describing the cat shown in Figure 2 (top, left), one of the Restaurant 1 staff who took care of her said, "she looks like you know, [a] hybrid of [a] wild cat" (interview, 9 Jan 2025).



Figure 2. Examples of four individuals expressing what we dubbed the "Sauraha phenotype": cats with a slender, relatively small build, and short-haired coats, with tabby or spotted markings over a tan or grayish undercoat. © Kris Hill.

Individuals diverged from the more common "Sauraha phenotype" primarily in coat color: 3/63 black, 7/63 tabby and white, and 3/63 brown and white. Although we did not witness any traits associated with pedigree breeds outside of a pet shop (1/63), we did communicate with a local man who bred cats with Persian-like traits.

Many cats did not neatly fit into our predefined relational codes, representing a transitional or liminal status between community cat and companion cat, or in how they interacted with humans within their territories. Examining the blurred boundaries between the relational categories offered insight into how cats and humans related within multispecies communities.

(Space) Free-Living, "Jungly," and Rural Cats

All the cats coded as "Space" were arguably interdependent on the multispecies communities within human-occupied territories. However, these cats appeared more human-avoidant and less at ease within human-defined spaces. They represent members of *Felis catus* not wholly reliant on humans for subsistence and who do not seek out human companionship (at least not from strangers). While imperfect, these codes provide a starting point to discuss the concept of *Umwelt transitions* and feline integration into human places and communities (Maran et al., 2016; Tønnessen, 2009).

"Jungly" is a term used within Nepal (sometimes spelled "Jangali" and meaning "of the forest [jungle]") to refer to animals who are living "wild." This term does not appear to have the same negative connotations as "feral" (Hill et al., 2022), but none-the-less represents a concept of "cat" that is distinct from members of the same species who live with or alongside humans. The question of where these "jungly" cats came from remains open, but 3/27 interviews and focus group discussions indicate that *Felis catus* have been present in the rural communities for at least two generations (and likely longer). However, their appearance in the town, restaurants, and hotels is relatively new and indicates a more visible and potentially growing feline population.

Interestingly, a cat appearing outside the kitchen at the Elephant Breeding Center was not treated the same as an able-bodied adult member of a wild species, who might be expected to return to the "jungle" and fend for themselves. Instead, the women of the community provided food and treated a wound the cat had incurred (Elephant Breeding Center interview, 8 Jan 2025). Similarly, villagers provide food for cats who integrate themselves into the community. Furthermore, this act of kindness is not necessarily motivated by any special love for cats but rather a cultural norm whereby neighbors share surplus food with members of the community (which include street-living cats and dogs). When asked what they thought of the cats in their community, residents responded that it did not matter what they thought because the cats were here regardless of whether they approved or not. This general acceptance that "the cats were here to stay" likely accounts for the increased visibility of cats occupying human places such as communal dwellings, restaurants, and hotels. Cats assigned the "Space" code tended not to have unique names and were addressed using terms such as "suri" (meaning "sweetie" or "kitty") or referred to by a generic name based on their coat color.

In six independent interviews, participants mentioned that cats were welcome because they hunted rodents that moved into human food stores. Perhaps what is most notable is

that concerns about cats predating on wild animals were never raised by participants. Even when directly asked, no concerns about a potential growing feline population were expressed, even during a focus group conducted with professional safari guides (NDET office focus group, 12 Jan 2025). Perhaps since smaller cats do not prey on larger or more charismatic species of wildlife (like deer, rhinos, or elephants) or livestock, they may be seen as "less threatening" than domestic dogs or larger wild predators. Conversely, concerns related to domestic dogs entering the buffer zone were mentioned and reportedly have led to conflict and fatalities among wildlife, livestock, and dogs.

(Place) Hotel/Restaurant Cats

A strong association with a particular human-defined place, such as a communal dwelling, restaurant, or hotel, defined the "Place" code. Rather than simply occupying a space (territory) that is in proximity to human places, individuals coded as "Place" (Table 2) had integrated into the daily act of living performed by human residents or staff. Multiple restaurants, bars, and hotels had more than one cat living within the grounds, including kittens and cats born there. These cats were fed from the kitchens, and several wore collars indicating these individuals were considered as "belonging with" a human, a place, or a community (while not considered "owned" in the commodified or paternalistic lexicon of Western pet-keeping, see Note 3). Furthermore, there was a transition from cats referred to by generic terms, such as "sweetie," to more personal names being assigned.

The association with a human-defined place represented a spectrum between "Space" and "Person." The cats associated with Bar/Restaurant 2 and 3 were closer to the "Space" coding, although individuals were at ease around humans and even initiated affiliative physical contact with guests. Perhaps due to the larger, less-protected layout of the buildings and seating area, these cats seemingly didn't bond as closely with individual staff members (at least not in the sense of a single person claiming guardianship). Furthermore, some cats on the periphery may represent a transitional phase of Space to Place; such individuals are likely (by nature) underrepresented in our study.

The larger canine presence in and around Bar/Restaurant 2 and 3 (Table 2) may have caused some cats to retreat or settle in more protected places to avoid dogs. Although most dogs linked to these Places were not aggressive toward the cats, several observations of dogs chasing cats on the street were documented. Furthermore, dangers posed to cats included wild animals, such as jungle cats, and were often cited as predators of domestic cats. Therefore, food, shelter, protection, and being welcomed into these human places likely explain why the cats remain.

The single resident cat in Bar/Restaurant 1 cohabited with a German Shepherd, who was described by the staff as being "owned" by the manager (interview, 15 Jan 2025). This establishment's second-floor location indicates a strong association of Place for this cat, at ease lazing on the furniture and unbothered by the dog. However, the cat was not described as being "owned" but rather as being the "restaurant cat." The cats of Restaurant 2 were also comfortable around staff, customers, and resident dogs. Staff explained how a disabled black cat had been intentionally harmed by someone in the community and that they had nursed her back to health (Restaurant 2 interview, 9 Jan 2025). This conflicted with the restaurant owner's earlier account that the cat was

injured falling from the roof. Sanitization or omission of details related to such stories is unsurprising, as business owners and residents would not want tourists to develop negative impressions of their community or culture (known as "Social Desirability Bias," Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

We documented seven individuals in and around Restaurant 1, matching a staff member's estimate of how many cats lived there: " … three, four, five, six, seven, eight. There are eight cats and one is wild, like [a] male" (interview, 9 Jan 2025). Despite not having one specific human guardian, individual cat–human bonds were evident and, in several cases, indicated a transitional state between the "Place" and "Person" codes. Examples included a male Restaurant 1 employee who lived nearby and cared for multiple kittens born around the restaurant and gave some collars, signaling they were cared for. Talking about a young adult female wearing a blue collar, he told us "I feed her. I take care of her" (interview, 9 Jan 2025). The way the two young cats interacted with this man during the interview (crawling into his jacket and snuggling up to his person) suggests mutual bonding. There was also evidence of guardian-like responsibility during an interview with another man who expressed concern about finding homes for all the kittens and that he wanted the mother spayed. However, he was unaware of any veterinary services (free or otherwise).

Another example of transitioning from primarily Place to Person attachments is the cats of Hotel 1. Six cats resided within the hotel grounds, interacting with staff and visitors in the restaurant and garden. However, the owner-couple clearly considered these to be "their" cats in the sense of guardianship, with the cats appearing to reciprocate this fondness (Hotel 1 interview, 13 Jan 2025). Fed by the couple themselves, rather than by a rotating kitchen staff, the cats had been given a room where they were shut in nightly to protect them against predators. Most of the cats were spayed or neutered (with plans to spay the one remaining intact female), despite the challenges of finding and then traveling to a clinic able to provide such services. The unique names given to these cats are another indication that they are closer to the "Person" code and represent examples of companion cats.

(Person) Pet/Companion Cats

The example of the cats of Hotel 1 endearing themselves and subsequently becoming perhaps a companion animal was not atypical. This represents an organic relationship developed from proximity, positive interactions, and mutual consent. However, the act of caring for a kitten beyond providing for their basic needs represents a more consciously sought guardian–companion animal type relationship on the part of the human. The distinction between the "Place" and "Person" code is that the cat belongs to a person (or is more attached to a person) rather than a place.

Western-originating ideas and commercially encouraged practices of "pet-keeping" (ownership status, breed preferences, purchase of luxury items and accessories for companion animals) were more evident in relation to dogs (Mahato et al., 2020; Szydlowski et al., 2026), but there were examples of cats being kept as companions. One example was a family who first introduced us to their dog and then showed us the kitten they had inside their home on the bed. Another was a safari guide, whose family tom cat

was unneutered and roamed freely but came home for food. He described how his wife and daughters assumed primary care for the cat but none-the-less identified a familial relation to the cat.

While most companion cats in our study appeared to have endeared themselves to individuals or restaurant/hotel staff who subsequently assumed some level of guardianship, others were purposefully acquired (non-commercially adopted) as a companion animal. We interviewed a man who had recently acquired two kittens specifically for companionship. These kittens provided emotional support and joy during a very difficult time following the recent death of his wife. Without any prompting, he referred to these cats as a source of emotional support. The kittens slept in his room at night and accompanied him to work in the small restaurant business he had built on the property. He also expressed concern about how they ventured too close to the road and might be struck by a vehicle, a fate that unfortunately ended the life of a previous companion cat (Baadreni Road interview, 13 Jan 2025).

Cat guardians mostly feared road traffic as the greatest threat to their cat, although free-roaming cats may still become victims of dogs or wild predators. However, the only two recent injuries we documented were related to cats getting too close to kitchen activities – one burn and one from scalding water. Both were being treated by administering homeopathic creams and were healing nicely. Diseases of cats were largely unknown to our non-veterinary interviewees, and a lack of medical supplies or treatment centers for cats was something several guardians commented on. Even for the Hotel 1 cats, whose guardians had the financial means, the travel to the nearest clinic was time-consuming and logistically challenging. Furthermore, formulated cat food and basic veterinary supplies were less obtainable for cats than they are for dogs. However, there is a recognition of a need to serve both the growing population of community cats as well as companion cats. We interviewed a local veterinarian who ran a clinic for cats and dogs and was leading an effort to provide vaccinations (namely for rabies), neutering, and basic veterinary care to street cats (Café/Restaurant interview, 10 Jan 2025).

Discussion

The three relational codes (Space, Place, and Person) assigned to individual cats highlighted the blurred boundaries between these definitions. Place is Space imbued with human-defined meaning and experiences (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012; Tuan, 1975, 1979), and cats whose identity is also shaped by these places inevitably develop relational bonds to one or more humans. Conversely, a cat who is strongly attached to a human may also develop a strong attachment to the Place they share with that person. In this paper, the "Person" code was assigned to individual cats who might be considered a companion animal. Indeed, such individuals were referred to as "my cat" in interviews. When a cat is acquired as a companion animal, the relational connection may be initiated and reinforced by the human guardian (who may be more attached to the cat than vice versa). However, some individual cats appeared bonded to specific humans. This is unsurprising as it has been well documented that companion cats can and do form bonds with their human guardians to varying degrees (Ines et al., 2021; Kotrschal et al., 2013; Vitale

et al., 2019). Furthermore, free-living urban cats are also known to develop bonds with regular caretakers (Centonze & Levy, 2002; Vitale, 2022). Therefore, the "Space," "Place," or "Person" codes are better reframed as a Space-Place-Person spectrum of cat–space–human interrelatedness. The Space-Place-Person spectrum underpins the social transition from "jungly" cat to community cat to companion cat.

Co-Creation of Multispecies Place

Space is an abstract, objective, and unbounded geographical area. Place is subjective, representing human-defined properties, and the concept has been used by human geographers to understand Spaces created through human experience, memory, and social connection (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012; Till & Robinson, 2025; Tuan, 1975, 1979). Under the original formulation of the concept, Space becomes Place when it is named, occupied, or emotionally invested in by humans. Arguably, cats (and other animals) also create their own sense of Place that may or may not overlap with human Places. For example, cats who form colonies are creating a sense of Place (Space imbued with meaning), and urban colonies share Space with human settlements. How much colony cats associate with humans, and how their home range overlaps human Place (restaurants, kitchens, barns, etc.), will vary. Likewise, a displaced cat (e.g., stray, abandoned, adopted) will seek out a space where they feel secure, which ultimately becomes a place of belonging.

We assigned the "Space" code to cats who appeared not to share a strong sense of Place with humans, while recognizing the limitations in both defining and measuring this. Furthermore, cats who are human avoidant would by their very nature be excluded from our study. Therefore, those coded as "Space" represented a transitional state where feline and human Places were converging. Several examples in which cats entered human spaces from "outside" were identified. Sometimes this was transient, with females giving birth in hotel grounds or human residential communities offering readily available food and a more protected space from predators, harsh conditions, and other hazards. While some left their offspring behind post-weaning, others arrived and stayed.

Space is objective and external to the organism that exists within it, whereas *Umwelt* refers to the subjective perceptual world (or Space) experienced by an individual through their unique sensory and cognitive capabilities (Uexküll, 1934/2010). However, neither Space nor *Umwelt* is static. Tønnessen (2009) coined the term "Umwelt transition" to describe the "lasting, systematic change, within the life cycle of a being, considered from an ontogenetic (individual), phylogenetic (population-, species-), or cultural perspective, from one typical appearance of its Umwelt to another" (p. 49). Place is made by individuals who occupy and interact within shared spaces, a process that also drives *Umwelt* transitions (Maran et al., 2016; Tønnessen, 2009). Furthermore, the "Umwelt transition elucidates how the life of an individual cat can alternate between the culture of a street cat and the humano–cat culture of a pet" (Jaroš, 2018, p. 370). As a cat moves into a human space, their past and future experiences of people shape how they perceive that space as more or less threatening. For example, one cat cautiously shared the warmth of an earthen firepit with us one evening. Her eyes tracked our movements and her gaze remained in our direction as we all remained in close proximity of the radiating heat. We read her tense crouch as a bodily expression of having experienced both human

tolerance and being shooed away, but with a tentative potential to enter an agreed co-sharing of trust. However, as fleeting guests with momentary inviting vocalizations and careful bodily movements, while she was happy to co-share the warmth that dulled the chilled night air with us, her body posture signaled that her previous human experience had taught her caution. Conversely, the cats of Hotel 1 and Restaurant 1 were extremely bold in their interactions with human guests, jumping up on tables and resisting subtle attempts to dissuade them from coveting diners' meals. This behavior is interpreted as the cats being confident in their surroundings, having established themselves as belonging. This was most prevalent amongst cats born and raised on the premises.

While the appearance of cats in hospitality businesses and communal residences is relatively new, interviews revealed that cats have existed in rural locations for much longer. How many cats currently live outside of, or on the very periphery of, human places remains undetermined. However, especially in regions where small wild cat species have not been part of the evolving ecosystem (e.g., Australia and islands), growing domestic cat populations have raised serious concerns about their presence threatening endemic species (Dickman, 2009; Loss & Marra, 2017; Medina et al., 2011, 2016). Even in parts of the world where domestic cat populations do not have any demonstrable impact on endemic wildlife populations, the Western rhetoric of "feral," "invasive," or "problematic" predominates discourses surrounding free-living cats (Hill, 2022; Lynn et al., 2019, 2020; Turner, 2022).

There is also the potential for negative attitudes amongst Western tourists who invariably visit the area for the wildlife and may deem free-roaming cats to be unsightly nuisances or pitiful strays (Hart, 2019; Hill, 2024a, 2025; Mameno & Kubo, 2021; Swain, 2020; Tully & Carr, 2023). Based on our observations and fieldnotes, tourist attitudes toward the cats appear largely indifferent or unconcerned, although we did witness several instances of annoyance related to cats jumping on tables and attempting to eat from patrons' plates. Hotel 1 owners also said some visitors did complain about the cats, but they indicated they had no intention of banishing the cats from the dining areas (interview, 13 Jan 2025). However, this general tolerance of cats by visitors and residents may change as populations grow.

During an interview with a woman feeding village cats, we asked, "What do you like about cats?" Her response was that she did not particularly like cats. She had a companion dog, whom she introduced us to, and stated she preferred the company of dogs. To the follow-up question, "Then why do you feed the cats?" she simply replied, "because they are hungry!" (Village 2 interview, 15 Jan 2025) as if this was a stupid question. This was a common theme, whereby residents simply shared food with the free-living cats and dogs in the community. This sharing was not necessarily out of any special fondness for cats or dogs, but rather it was a cultural norm of sharing surplus food with the community that extended beyond the human family and neighbors.

Nepalese residents would joke that "it does not matter what we think about the cats – they are here whether we like it or not" (e.g., Rhino Street interview, 15 Jan 2025). This general acceptance of more-than-human community members and the agency of free-living animals can be contrasted with the Western rhetoric of control, dominance, and governance over nature and other animals (see Haraway, 2008; Ingold, 2000; Palmer, 2003; Plumwood, 1993; Sutton & Taylor, 2019). Within street cat culture observed in

Europe and North America, free-living cats are typically fed by a minority of devoted (and often stigmatized) caretakers whom the cats associate with food and friendliness while treating the majority of urban residents with caution (Centonze & Levy, 2002; Finkler & Terkel, 2011; Gunther et al., 2016; Haspel & Calhoon, 1990; Jaroš, 2016, 2018; Natoli et al., 1999). However, we found the act of providing food and care was not viewed as anything special or unusual amongst Sauraha residents. We heard a couple of stories of cats and dogs who had been beaten, but these appeared to be historic or isolated instances rather than a generalized persecution of a species or population.

"Place identity" describes how a place becomes part of personal identity or embodied in the definition of the self (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012; Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2024). Cats who were born and raised within a given space have likely developed a strong sense of Place identity. However, they will also form interpersonal bonds with conspecifics, as well as develop strong attachments to a particular human. In relation to the restaurant and hotel cats, they undoubtedly have a strong Place identity. Additionally, they may have formed relational attachments to humans. The humans who live and/or work in these Spaces are integral to the making of Place, and the cats are active agents in the co-creation of more-than-human culture. For example, many residents put out dishes of rice for the dogs (12 interviews and daily observations), but participants explained that "the cats don't like rice" and prefer chicken (Village 2, interview 15 Jan; Rhino Street interview, 15 Jan 2025).

Humano–Cat Culture (Companions and Commodities)

Building on the notion of humano–cat societies arising from shared feline and human spaces within a multispecies city (Lestel et al., 2006), Jaroš (2018) described distinct cat cultures and cat–human cultures observed in Estonia. The former describes a culture whereby free-living urban cats are fed and cared for by a devoted minority and either ignored or shunned by the rest of the community (Jaroš, 2016, 2018, 2021). While this description of street cat cultures can be readily applied to many urban humano–cat societies, we did not observe such obvious social stratification of cat–human relations in Sauraha. The generalized acceptance of a feline presence by Sauraha residents may be conducive to more human-friendly cats, who in turn endear themselves to individual humans. The formation of such bonds leads to some cats perhaps being considered a companion animal or even family member. Therefore, it is likely there will be an increase in companion cats living with Sauraha residents in the future.

Jaroš (2018) coined the term "humano–cat culture" to describe the increased dependency of cats on human companionship and care, coupled with human control over feline reproduction, feeding, and spatial coordinates of their companion cat. However, the extent and nature of "control" is subjective, and the concept of humano–cat cultures has been extended to describe relationships between people and human-friendly colony cats who might be considered "community pets" (Hill, 2025). Likewise, the restaurant and hotel cats described in our study exemplify the blurred boundary between community cats and humano–cat cultures and between free-living and companion cats.

When asked, interviewees invariably said they considered their companion cats to be family. This was the most definitive relational characteristic separating a hotel or

restaurant cat (coded as "Place") from a companion cat (coded as "Person"). The nature of the human–companion animal bond developed in these examples is similar to those documented in other cultures, supporting the notion that the formation of kinship (or kinship-like) bonds with more-than-human animals is a universal phenomenon (Bouma et al., 2022; Fox, 2006; Herzog, 2014; Hill, 2020). However, Western practices of "pet-keeping" and the commodification of companion animals, namely ownership, breed preferences, and the purchase of luxury products and accessories (Ritvo, 1987), are a relatively new phenomenon in Nepal (Acharya et al., 2019; Mahato et al., 2020). Furthermore, companion dogs are far more prevalent (Acharya et al., 2019; Mahato et al., 2020). While most of the cats we encountered were typified by the "Sauraha phenotype" (Figure 2), there was some deviation in coat color. Unlike for the dog population (Mahato et al., 2020; Szydlowski et al., 2026), there was no evidence on the streets, business premises, or public spaces of cats with pedigree-like traits. However, during a visit to a local pet shop we observed a Persian-like kitten that the shop owner claimed not to be for sale, although we later learned that he bred Persian cats (longhaired and brachycephalic). This suggests the potential for unregulated breeding of cats for phenotypes that are not conducive to the health and wellbeing of the feline population (Oxley Heaney, 2024; Roberts et al., 2025).

Conclusion

In contrast with the Western context, where street-cat cultures consist of colony cats and dedicated caretakers/feeders who are socially ostracized/unsupported, the cats appearing in Sauraha are passively accepted as part of the community. The term "community cats" has been promoted by cat welfare organizations in the UK and the US to instill a sense of community responsibility and the notion that the cats belong (McDonald et al., 2018; Schaffner, 2017). However, an acceptance of the feline presence and a sense of duty to provide for community members of all species appears to have developed organically in Sauraha. This may change as populations grow, and especially if there are concerns (founded or unfounded) about domestic cat populations interfering with the surrounding ecosystems.

Notes

1. We recognize this is due to institutionalized inequality in global research funding and access to international academic publishing and acknowledge that research published in non-English journals may be overlooked (see Hill et al., 2025 for a discussion of this in relation to anthrozoology/human-animal studies).
2. "Western" and "Westernized" are used to allude to the ambiguous and multifaceted cultures, born out of civilizations dominated by Judeo-Christian doctrine, entrenched in European colonialism, and a materialist worldview that extols the scientific method by which to understand the world (Birken, 1992; Dawes & Smith, 2018; Hurn, 2012b).
3. While we favor the terms "guardian" and "guardianship" to acknowledge assumed moral responsibilities toward a companion animal, we recognize "owner" and "ownership" as legal terms and apply them when deemed necessary. In some instances, those who assume care for an animal do not consider themselves either a guardian or owner, so we remain conscious not to impose culturally defined terms.

4. There are 142 "mother languages" in Nepal, with Nepali, Hindi, Tharu, English, and a variety of indigenous languages common in Sauraha. So that many words represented a type of "pidgin" language adapted from those three (Government of Nepal, 2021). Tharu (displaced people) are the largest group in Sauraha, with many living in the buffer zone of the Chitwan National Park.

Acknowledgements

We are immensely grateful to the Society for Companion Animals Studies (SCAS) for a 2024 Pump-Priming award. Without this generous funding, the fieldwork described in this study would not have been possible. Belinda Crum Cano accompanied us on the field trip and her assistance with the logic of data collection was most valuable. We acknowledge that the study depended on the cooperation of the cats, dogs, and humans who participated in our study, including Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust (HART) staff and volunteers, who invited us to visit their clinic, Animal Nepal, Local Nature Guides, Paws & Pancakes, and numerous local businesses. A special thank you is owed to Stand Up 4 Elephants for supporting us throughout the study, especially during the fieldwork phase. Our translators were fundamental to many of the interviews, especially in more rural areas.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Fieldwork for this project was funded by a Society for Companion Animals Studies (SCAS) 2024 Pump-Priming award (PI: Michelle Szydlowski). Kristine Hill was supported by a Visiting Professorship (Summer 2025) and International Research Teams (IRT) 2025–2026 project, "Coexistence of humans and free-living cats: conflicts and opportunities in more-than-human neighborhoods," both awarded by the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové.

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