

Submission
No 53

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Hunter Bird Observers Club

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Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc

www.hboc.org.au

The Hon. Emma Hurst MLC
Chair, Inquiry Into the Management of Cat populations in New South Wales.

A Priority Issue for the Committee:

Domestic Cats are Killers **Companion Animals Act 1998 (as amended) must change**

Introduction

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Inquiry's comprehensive terms of reference. While we hold broad views on both the domestic and feral cat issue, and we reference some of those views to follow, it seems there is one immediate issue well within the capacity of the State to implement, and without delay.

That is a change to the Companion Animals Act 2018 as amended.

Following progress in other states, it is imperative that domestic cats are fully confined and not permitted to roam, day or night. This needs to be a Statewide implementation, or at an absolute minimum, enact enabling legislation to allow Local Councils to implement and enforce containment.

There is surely consensus that cats are a major threat to Australia's wildlife. Cats have played a leading role in most of Australia's 34 mammal extinctions since 1788 and are playing a major role in the on-going decline of over 230 threatened native species, and many non-threatened species. The loss of this biodiversity degrades our ecosystems and diminishes both the character of the places we live and the natural places we value.

Both feral and pet cats contribute to the problem. Federally DCCEEW has done valuable work with the 'Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats' and through the Feral Cat Taskforce; and while efforts to eradicate feral cats and exclude them from protected sites are immensely valuable, inadequate attention is paid in NSW to the damage created by unconfined domestic cats. There is now a wealth of sound research, including Australian Government funded research, to indicate the extent of the problem, emphasising that domestic cats living near bushland roam further and hunt more frequently, reducing the value of natural areas that should be havens for wildlife and that are also favoured recreational places for people.

Domestic cats are concentrated in very high densities in our cities and towns. In suburbs that do not require containment, there are up to 100 roaming and hunting cats per square kilometre.

In the bush there is only one feral cat for every three to four square kilometres, so even though each individual feral cat kills about four times more animals per year than a domestic cat, cats inflict a much higher toll per square kilometre in suburbs than in the bush. Roaming and hunting domestic cats kill 30 – 50 times more native animals per square kilometre in suburbs than feral cats kill per square kilometre in the bush:

- Total domestic cat population (Australia): 4.9 to 5.3 million
- Percentage of domestic cats that roam away from home: 71 to 78%
- Kill rate per roaming and hunting domestic cat: 186 animals per year (reptiles, birds and mammals – the majority native).

In a Media Release (2nd June 2022) the former State Environment Minister James Griffin, confirmed these statistics and that nationally, domestic cats kill approximately 390 million animals every year. Other research quotes 546 million animals in total of which 323 million animals are native species. Either number is horrific in terms of biodiversity loss and the impact on local and national extinctions.

There is much more that we could submit as evidence, but we are far from alone in advocating change and while there is no doubt that domestic cats are valued companions; while roaming they are also at risk from accident, attack by dogs and disease. For the benefit of our environment and it seems the health of the cats themselves, there must be greater focus on containment and if that is best managed by empowering Local Government it is imperative that happens without further delay. Each day's delay sees an estimated 180,000 native animals killed in the Greater Sydney area alone (Legge 2023).

Local Government NSW (LGNSW) has also consistently identified the need for stronger legislation. Their policy platform advocates for “amendments to legislation to enable councils to more effectively manage the nuisance effects of cats on residents and wildlife, including...limiting the roaming of cats beyond their owner’s property”.

Containment is the only way to stop domestic cats from hunting and killing native species. The best the previous government could do was to provide a small grant and to work with the RSPCA and selected Councils to “educate and help people contain their cats”. Whether or not that initiative is achieving results in the Councils selected, we would maintain that the situation is well past the education and encouragement stage, and it is time for a stronger government response and a decisive initiative.

While the current legislation does provide some onus on owners in relation to registration, microchipping and desexing of domestic cats, enforcement of those controls appears very problematic and could only be partially effective without containment.

If we are serious about a “Keeping Cats Safe at Home” project as proposed by the previous government, then it must be noted that NSW and WA are the only states in Australia that do not enable local government to consider cat containment through the state legislation. For example, the respective companion animal management legislation in Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia supports local government in creating locally specific laws for pet cat containment.

There is currently no equivalent capacity in NSW legislation to enforce cat containment. Minor amendments to the current Act could equip local governments with the necessary powers to consider and enforce cat containment at a local council level. Clearly statewide legislation would be preferred. Neither cats nor wildlife understand Local Government boundaries.

We urge you to recommend the government acts without delay and finally provides the necessary guardianship of the environment through the Act, while empowering local government and simultaneously protecting the welfare of valued companion animals. This amendment to the Act may also have far reaching impacts in relation to the Government's commitment on the extinction crisis.

We strongly encourage your support to this specific initiative and await the recommendations from the Inquiry.

Graeme Stevens

(for HBOC Conservation Sub-Committee 1st November 2024)

References

One Cat, one year, 110 native animals: Lock up your pet, it's a killing machine, The Conversation, 14 Dielenberg, J., Murphy, B., Dickman, C., Woinarski, J., Woolley, L-A., Calver, M. and Legge. S. (2020) May 2020.

Draft threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats

<https://consult.dcceew.gov.au/draft-updated-threat-abatement-plan-for-predation-by-feral-cats>

Legge, S., Woinarski, J.C.Z., Dickman, C., Murphy, B.P., Woolley, L-A., Calver, M. (2020). We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: The impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife. *Wildlife Research*, 47, 523-553. <https://doi.org/10.1071/WR19174>

Companion Animals Act 1998 No 87

<https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/whole/html/inforce/current/act-1998-087>

NSW Government Media Release: "CATS FEE-LINE FINE AT HOME" Thursday, 2 June 2022

www.rspcansw.org.au/safecats

<https://www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/the-staggering-death-toll-of-roaming-pet-cats-finally-revealed-20230606-p5de8u.html> (Legge, S. 2003)

About the Hunter Bird Observers Club

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) was established in 1976 and currently has a membership of 400 members. Although the Club is based in Newcastle NSW membership includes members from other areas in NSW and from interstate. Approximately one third of the membership resides in the Lake Macquarie LGA.

Aims of HBOC

- *to encourage and further the study and conservation of Australian birds and their habitat;*
and
- *to encourage bird observing as a leisure-time activity.*

Activities include monthly regular outings, evening meetings, camps and field studies. HBOC promotes systematic field studies which include regular surveys by volunteers from the membership.

All data gathered from field studies are entered into the national bird record database administered by BirdLife Australia; Birddata <https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/>. Data are used to underpin conservation issues and HBOC promotes systematic surveys and data collection.

HBOC has a long history of working in collaboration with local councils, national parks and other state agencies, industry and schools.

For more information go to www.hboc.org.au