

Submission
No 8

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Blue Mountains Greens

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Submission to the NSW Parliament Legislative Council's Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in New South Wales

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Introduction

Since the arrival of the First Fleet, cats, along with other introduced animals, have had a devastating impact on native animal populations and played an important role in creating the current **extinction crisis**. We need to accept the responsibility for reducing and managing the impact of these highly efficient predators. A massive injection of funds and resources must be devoted to the control and removal of feral cats from national parks and the state overall as a matter of urgency.

The City of the Blue Mountains LGA is situated in a **World Heritage National Park**.

The local economy relies upon the booming, year-round tourism industry attracted to the sights, walks and natural beauty – including **unique native wildlife**.

However, **the habitat of native birds and animals in the Blue Mountains is increasingly under threat**.

Bushland habitats and native wildlife populations in the Greater Blue Mountains area and bordering towns have suffered in **recent years from climate change** – droughts, hotter and more frequent bushfires, higher temperatures – and invasive animals, including **domestic pets**. Coupled with continued support of rural land clearing, conditions are likely to worsen and this is the picture across much of NSW.

The killing of native wildlife by cats, both domestic and feral, threatens the survival of native species and the integrity of crucial ecosystems.

These circumstances increase the urgency for the drastic reduction of the killing of native animals by feral and domestic cats.

We believe that this aim can only be achieved by:

- A well-resourced, state-wide campaign to **remove feral cats** from national parks and non-urban landscapes.
- A concerted, **state-wide strategy** combining community education on responsible cat ownership with the **enforcement of stringent cat containment** and other regulations.
- **Compulsory containment** of domestic cats on the owners' property, especially in LGAs close to bushland.
- **Amending state legislation**¹ to give local councils the powers to enforce cat containment regulations within their LGA.

¹ Such as the Companion Animals Act and the Local Government Act

- State **government resourcing** of local government to facilitate monitoring and impounding of roaming cats.
- **Limits on the number of cats** allowed per household.
- **Supporting lower-income cat owners** with free access to compulsory cat management strategies such as de-sexing and microchipping.

This submission covers all terms of reference.

a) the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings

While we recognise that all animals are sentient, the impact that invasive species have on native wildlife populations must be prioritised. **Cats kill a staggering number** of native animals;² many pet cats are free to roam and, although they each kill fewer animals than feral cats, there are far more of them.³

Here are two **case studies** of species threatened by cats locally:

1. Local activists have been inspired by the [estimated 95% hatchling loss rate](#) of turtles by fox and cat predation to construct a **breeding ‘island’** in the Glenbrook Lagoon.
2. Hazelbrook residents have observed that over approximately a decade, **only four chicks** from a Masked Lapwing breeding pair, producing on average nine chicks each year, have been observed to **survive past adolescence**, again bringing the predation to 95%.

Urgent legislative action (see TOR e) is required to mitigate these devastating losses to biodiversity in protected areas, such as National Parks, which are also rapidly losing habitat due to logging, climate change and bushfires.⁴

b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

We propose a **raft of measures** in legislation and resourcing at both the State and LGA levels, containment of domestic cats being just one facet. Given the link between social and financial disadvantage and entry of unregistered cats into the pound system, these measures will need to be carefully **targeted** to be effective. (See TOR h) for exemplars of other Councils’ programs).

Potential barriers:

- That **most Australians have far less contact with the wildlife than they do with their pets**; thus, the suffering of wildlife being predated upon is “out of

² They have a major role in most of Australia’s 34 mammal extinctions since colonisation and are a significant cause to why populations of at least 230 other threatened native species are declining. <https://theconversation.com/herding-cats-councils-efforts-to-protect-wildlife-from-roaming-pets-are-hampered-by-state-laws-200266>

³ See the Annotated Bibliography for sources and statistics.

⁴ It has been estimated that 143 million animals lost their lives in the 2019 wildfires that destroyed a third of the Blue Mountains National Park’s bushland. <https://www.google.com/search?q=Black+Summer+Bushfires+deaths+of+native+animals+Blue+Mountains>

sight, out of mind” compared with the inconvenience of responsible pet ownership.

- The prevailing attitude towards native wildlife as ‘**pests**’ for interfering with crops and livestock.
- That **owners of pet cats deny evidence** that cats predate on wildlife.
- The **philosophical belief** that the state has no right to contain cats.
- Some vulnerable **social groups**⁵ **will be disadvantaged** in understanding and/or implementing obligations.

Suggested solutions:

- A **publicity campaign**, like that of the [Albury City Council](#), and **regime of fines** (perhaps with grandfathering provisions) to assist the roll-out of state-wide mandates.
- **Mandatory de-sexing and microchipping** for the safe return of pets or rehoming of strays.
- The state-wide implementation of the [Federal Minister for the Environment’s proposed federal legislation](#) on limiting the number of cats per household.
- **Support**⁶ for cat owners to comply with new regulations.

c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

Two in three cat owners have lost a cat in a roaming related accident. Organisations such as the RSPCA, other animal welfare organisations, and most Local Government Websites have [resources](#) to [help](#) people create stimulating and safe environments for their domestic cats; cats who have previously roamed can be [transitioned](#) into contained environments; and there is a wealth of information, including [research by the RSPCA](#), which shows that it is more humane and better for their health⁷ to contain pets and not to re-release “community” strays that are partly dependent on humans, and that some can be rehomed. However, such information needs to be more effectively promoted for it to reach its target audience. (See TOR d.)

d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives

The State Government needs to build and advertise a major **digital platform** containing information on the extent of cats’ predation on wildlife, health benefits for cats and techniques for containment.

⁵ Renters, the aged and disabled, people of low income, socially and educationally disadvantaged people.

⁶ **Funding to resource Council** “Companion Animal Management Officers (Cats)” or “Wildlife Protection Officers” to oversee, monitor and enforce implementation of the program; subsidies for disadvantaged pet cat owners to carry out the required mandatory de-sexing and microchipping, and construct barriers in their yards.

⁷ It reduces the risk of them getting sick or injured, they live longer and healthier lives, and it keeps our wildlife safe.

[Here](#) is the Blue Mountain City Council's webpage on 'keeping cats safe.' It's good that the information is there, but campaigns need to be: **simple, catchy/memorable and evocative**; they should be placed on **sites** (digital and offline) at which **cat owners are likely to visit**, whether or not they already have any interest in the matter; they should contain **quick links to resources**, and be **targeted to specific audiences**.

Consider short cartoons like [this one by the RSPCA](#), and **large posters** in bold lettering with a **QR code** for further information.

Previous assistance programs (eg. cat enclosure subsidies)⁸ and campaigns in the area have not reached or persuaded their audience, however. Information campaigns need to be uploaded to social media (such as TikTok) that appeal to cat owners.

Educational programs will have limited impact without mandatory responsible ownership legislation and enforcement.

e) implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies

In most Australian States and territories **local government has a key role** in both community **education and enforcement** of anti-roaming laws. In Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, this is the situation.

Given the extinction crisis in Australia, we call on the NSW government to introduce legislation **amending the The NSW Companion Animals Act of 1998** and **resource local councils** so that:

- Domestic **cat containment is mandated** for the entire state, and
- **Local councils can enforce responsible cat ownership** regulations suited to conditions in their LGAs.

Pet-owners may have the main responsibility for keeping domestic cats from roaming and endangering local wildlife, but without some degree of enforcement the problem will persist.

On 29 August 2023, Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) carried **unanimously a motion calling for law reform** in NSW.⁹

- The [full text](#) of this motion supports the Local Government Association of NSW's call for similar law amendments and limiting roaming of cats.
- BMCC also promotes the use of cat enclosures, as in this [fact sheet](#).

⁸ \$400 'for a limited time,' with an application link that leads to a [broken page](#), because the program ended in June 2024. This program was not widely known to cat owners when in operation. The figures of the take-up of the \$400 subsidy under the "Keeping Cats Safe Program" administered by the RSPCA are not available.

⁹ "Changes to the Companion Animals Act 1998 to bring NSW into line with other states and territories by allowing local government to introduce cat containment policies in consultation with the local community, including phase-in periods, selection of areas within the LGA to which the policy applies, monitoring frameworks and resources allocation."

In Victoria, the State Government cat management strategy says that “**Councils** (local government) **are the primary regulator of domestic cats**, including registration, local laws and management of nuisance issues.” (See TOR h.)

At present, local **councils in NSW are not adequately resourced** to address cat containment.

f) the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs

Desexing is generally accepted and it **prevents the creation of new feral offspring** of domestic animals; it's also integral to **responsible pet ownership** practice and improves the **emotional and physical wellbeing** of pet cats.

Desexing should be subsidised and free for low-income households. It is important to remove barriers and provide assistance. At a later stage, the **ownership of un-desexed cats above a certain age could be penalised**, the bureaucratic enforcement assisted by a registry of un-desexed domestic cats.

However, desexing alone will not suffice – desexed cats still hunt and kill wildlife (See TOR i.)

g) the impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system

There are few definitive studies on the shelter system and the impact of cat programs attempting to lower the numbers of cats abandoned or terminated. There is not always agreement between stakeholders making submissions or commenting on these programs.

However the NSW RSPCA's recent “Keeping (domestic) Cats Safe Program” had the [impact of significantly reducing the number of cats](#) brought to pounds.

[Reports show](#) that most cats in council pounds or animal shelters are “**community strays**,” also known as “**ferals**.”¹⁰ **Residents often cannot rehouse the cats**, as they are unable to afford full care, de-sexing or microchipping.

Another group of cats turned into pounds are those **owned by renters whose landlords will not allow pets** or assist with building enclosures.¹¹

Anecdotal evidence suggests that most cats turned into pounds are not microchipped and therefore cannot be returned. Many are rehomed; however, **32% of cats entering NSW council pounds are terminated**.¹² **In 2022-3 the RSPCA cared for 14,535 animals** in its pound system in NSW.¹³ Cat containment introduced by itself may not sufficiently reduce the admission of abandoned cats or lower the number of them terminated. Therefore, it will be **necessary to introduce a targeted suite of measures** (as outlined above in TOR b).

¹⁰ These are “semi-owned” cats, living on the outskirts of suburbia, sometimes living around rubbish dumps and fed by low-income residents. The Federal Government Draft updated the *Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats* so that unowned strays and semi-owned or community cats are now classed as ‘feral.’

¹¹ Necessitating assistance measures for disadvantaged groups, as outlined in TOR b).

¹² Reports suggest that most terminated cats are either feral cats or litters.

¹³ It is difficult to find a state-wide estimate of the cost to the organisation.

h) the outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories

Across Australia, action on this front is very patchy and localised. Relatively little detailed data on the effectiveness of a wide range of cat management strategies is available. However, an increasing number of States, territories and local councils and shires have taken up the challenge. Strategies include cat curfews, cat containment, cat prohibition in certain areas, physical barriers to exclude cats from protected bushland, and trapping. Some examples are:

The **Australian Capital Territory** has a well-supported and effective [cat management program](#) with three overarching objectives:

- Caring for pet cats through **responsible cat ownership**.
- **Protecting wildlife** from cat predation.
- **Reducing nuisance** by roaming cats to ACT residents.

Seventeen suburbs in Canberra, backing onto bushland areas, are now designated cat-containment suburbs.¹⁴ [The plan](#) includes a ‘grand-fathering provision’¹⁵ and education strategies; it also provides for control of feral cats, measures to raise awareness of threats to wildlife and engagement with landholders; and it is orchestrated through partnerships between government, non-profit infrastructure and community organisations.

Animal Welfare Victoria, the State government body, has among its roles to:

- Provide “**cat containment support** to councils with curfews to aid in the transition to new requirements.”
- **Enhance cat containment education and programs**, including simplifying enclosure guidelines and researching the welfare of contained cats.
- Encourage Councils to “**foster partnerships** with local organisations to assist residents in constructing safe and simple cat enclosures.”

Tweed Shire (NSW) has prohibitions on cats in five locations, cat containment in one location, and overnight cat curfews in a further four locations. Cat prohibition is also proposed for other new housing developments in the Shire. The Council has monitored cats in surrounding bushland, for up to 3 years.¹⁶

i) options for reducing the feral cat population

Here, we interpret “feral” to refer to cats that live in non-urban areas, survive by hunting and rarely interact with humans.

We suggest the following for reducing the feral population:

¹⁴ 24 hours a day, although this constitutes only a small part of the ACT area, which will hopefully be extended. See the CSIRO article in the bibliography for further reading.

¹⁵ We consider that a much earlier cut-off birth date would be more appropriate In the Blue Mountains.

¹⁶ Interesting to note, they have found cat prohibition more effective than containment or curfews and also less costly to police, due to the much lower cat population.

- **State-wide ongoing control and**, where possible, **eradication** programs utilising the **most humane methods** currently available.¹⁷
- Expanding Australia's **predator-free fenced areas** and feral cat-free islands.¹⁸
- **Removal or rehoming of unowned roaming cats** that have some contact with humans ("community strays").¹⁹
- **Resourcing the NPWS²⁰ to remove feral cats** from Blue Mountains National Park and the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

While we acknowledge that **cats are sentient**, we note it is rarely mentioned that **native animals experience suffering as keenly as domestic species**.

Native wildlife has not had the time to evolve defences against efficient non-native predators such as feral cats. Therefore, the **suffering experienced by native animals from predation by feral cats is great**.²¹

If **trap-neuter-release** is carried out as the main strategy for managing feral cats, there is a clear danger that many **endangered species will simply become extinct** as young neutered feral cats are returned to the bush to hunt and kill native wildlife.²²

[Scientific research](#) conducted in Mandurah WA reveals the devastation one cat can cause,²³ clearly showing that trap-neuter-release responses would not be sufficient.

Therefore, we support the humane **trapping and removal of feral cats**.

j) any other related matters

The following may require further consideration:

- Possible restrictions on breeding and retail of domestic cats
- The health risks of purebreds
- The health risks of roaming and feral cats for humans, livestock and threatened species

¹⁷ Eg. Trapping and shooting.

¹⁸ [Recommended](#) by the Invasive Species Council

¹⁹ For their own benefit and that of the wildlife: their health is poor and their environmental impact significant. They interact and breed with feral cats.

²⁰ The National Parks and Wildlife Service of NSW plays an important role in providing habitat and protection for our threatened wildlife. Resource cuts over recent years have compromised the ability of the NPWS to meet the demands of controlling feral species, including cats.

²¹ ie. Torn apart and killed, losing their offspring violently, or loss of habitat which their species have relied on for many thousands, if not millions of years. See [Zoe Reynolds' article: cats have learnt to flip over echidnas and disembowel them](#).

²² An estimated 80 threatened or endangered species within NSW are preyed upon by feral cats. These include small ground-dwelling animals such as echidnas (or spiny anteaters) and some species of bandicoots.

²³ A free-roaming, desexed cat had a [devastating impact](#) on a colony of threatened Australian Fairy Terns, resulting in almost 50 dead, missing or injured chicks and adults and the abandonment of the entire colony of 220 birds. The cat had been desexed.

Conclusion

New South Wales is behind other states on matters of cat management. New policies should regulate responsible cat ownership, reduce the feral population, effectively disseminate information and support cat owners with compliance. All of these measures must be **implemented in tandem** for them to succeed; feral cat reduction will be ineffective without regulations on desexing and containing pet cats, and vice versa.

Some of these measures will require time to take effect but we have **no time to lose**. Councils urgently need the resources and prerogative to mitigate the devastating contribution of cats in the degradation of biodiversity in Australian environments. We are facing a **national extinction crisis** of our native wildlife.

Annotated Bibliography

Pertaining to TOR (a):

<https://invasives.org.au/media-releases/media-release-invasive-species-inquiry-in-nsw-welcomed/>

Feral and pet cats in Australia kill over 1 billion mammals, 400 million birds, 600 million reptiles and 90 million frogs each year. Per capita the kill rate of pet cats is 25% that of feral cats, a substantial proportion.

<https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>

Pet cats allowed to freely roam outdoors kill an estimated 323 million native animals and 223 million non-native animals annually. Of this number, 65 million native animals are killed in the Greater Sydney Area.

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

This ANU analysis reveals that 71% of pet cats are able to roam and 78% of this figure actively hunt. Although feral cats kill four times more animals per year than domestic cats, there are 54-100 roaming and hunting domestic cats per square kilometre in suburbs and only one feral cat for every 3-4 square kilometres in the bush.

Pertaining to TOR (g)

https://www.rspcansw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/A5_RSPCA_Annual_Report_2023_WEB_F.pdf

<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/189625/Report%20No.%202%20-%20%20PC%208%20-%20Pounds%20in%20New%20South%20Wales.pdf>

<https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/cats-and-dogs/ACT-Cat-Plan/>

<https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/companion-animals-management-and-welfare/management-of-cats-in-australia/>

Pertaining to TOR (h)

<https://www.publish.csiro.au/wr/WR19174>

An extensive scholarly summary of the evidence of the impact of cats on Australian Wildlife.

Further Reading

https://find.library.unisa.edu.au/discovery/fulldisplay/alma9916109561001831/61USOUTHAUS_INST:ROR

GPS data – cats roam as far as 40 house yards.

<https://www.ils.nsw.gov.au/help-and-advice/pest-control/vertebrate-pest-animals/feral-cats>

Classification of 'ferals' and list of *Regional Strategic Pest Animal Management Plans* by Local Land Services NSW.

https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/media/dehnttbf/7-4-the-impact-of-pet-cat-impacts_f.pdf

A fact sheet on the impact of pet cats by the Threatened Species Recovery Hub.