

Submission
No 13

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: BirdLife Australia
Date Received: 25 November 2024

NSW Inquiry into the management of domestic cats

Date: 22 November, 2024

BirdLife Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the management of cat populations. BirdLife Australia is an independent grassroots charity, with over 360,000 supporters throughout Australia. We have been the voice for Australia's birds for over a century, protecting native birds and their habitats with on-ground projects and advocacy, informed by rigorous science and sound academic partnerships. Our conservation programs adopt a multi-species landscape-scale approach that is supported by thousands of volunteers and citizen scientists.

BirdLife Australia has played a major role in the conservation and monitoring of Australia's birdlife throughout our 120-year history. We have invested in long-term threatened bird conservation programs, often in partnership with other organisations and communities, bringing together research, education, on-ground remediation, advocacy and campaigning. The organisation relies on thousands of volunteers and citizen scientists who play a key role in delivering our bird conservation programs.

Background

Recent research has indicated that pet cats kill 546 million animals (323 million of which are native) across Australia every year – this number impacts 61% of federally listed threatened species. We are only now starting to understand the significant role that domestic cats play in the injury and death of staggering numbers of native Australian birds.¹ The environmental toll from feral and roaming pet cats cannot be understated. They are responsible for the deaths of an estimated 2 billion native mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs every year and have driven over 25 of our native species to extinction. The impact on bird species overall is not uniform, with about half (357) of Australia's birds documented as being predated by cats. This includes 71 of the 117 (61%) of federally listed threatened species.²

Local governments play a central role in cat management in most states and territories, holding primary responsibility for managing the estimated 5.3 million domestic cats living in towns and cities. Yet, under NSW's current laws local councils are prevented from mandating that cats are

¹ Legge, S, Woinarski, JCZ, Dickman, CR, Murphy BP, Woolley, LA & Calver, MC 2020, 'We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife', *Wildlife Research*, vol. 47, pp. 523-539.

² Baker, P.J., Bentley, A.J., Ansell, R.J. and Harris, S. (2005) Impact of predation by domestic cats *Felis catus* in an urban area. *Mammal Review* 35. 302-312. doi:[10.1111/j.1365-2907.2005.00071.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2907.2005.00071.x)

contained. A harmonised state (and national) approach is required to prevent the inconsistencies in management policies across the jurisdictions.

Legislative inconsistencies between states/territories and local councils to domestic cat management and relevant definitions has caused confusion and conflict when implementing cat management initiatives. Shared resources coordinated research and evaluation activities and consistent approaches to the management and definitions of cats will achieve greater consistency and generate stronger community support.

The issue

The NSW government must introduce clear laws to ensure pet cats are kept safe at home in order to save millions of native animals every year. [Recently released research from the Australian National University](#) found that roaming pet cats kill around 66 million native animals each year in Sydney alone. Given many of the actions required to protect our wildlife require complex legislative reforms, a simple step in managing domestic cat predation is to remove the current barriers local councils face in instituting cat containment policies.

Cats are undoubtedly important and valued as companion animals, providing huge benefits to their owners. However, management strategies that aim to keep free-roaming cats (be that feral or domestic) at supposed manageable or stable levels in the landscape are not compatible with native species conservation. Efforts need to shift towards a holistic approach on domestic cat management including educating irresponsible pet owners through awareness and behaviour change campaigns, providing support that addresses financial, cultural and psychological barriers as well as cat management regulations and strategies that are tailored to the specific cat ownership categories that exist in Australia.

Government intervention is crucial by making cat containment mandatory and enforceable and cultural considerations and socio-economic factors must be considered to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for all cat owners. By combining education, support services, legislative measures, and addressing cultural and socio-economic aspects, we can effectively promote responsible cat ownership and protect native bird populations.

BirdLife Australia strongly recommends:

At a national level:

- 1. The State Government should advocate to the Federal Environment Minister for harmonised regulations across all jurisdictions to better support local council efforts.**
- 2. Consistent definition of feral, stray, and domestic cats applied across national, state, territory, and local government legislation.**

At a state level:

- 3. Amend the *NSW Companion Animals Act 1998* to enable local governments to enforce anti-roaming laws for pet cats at a local level.**
- 4. Allocate a minimum of \$9 million to fund compliance, state-wide education, subsidised cat containment and desexing, identification and registration programs.**
 - a. Initiatives should highlight the benefits of containment, including the role individuals can play in protecting native birds but focusing on how cat containment is good for the cats rather than portraying them in a negative light.**
- 5. Encourage local governments to develop companion animal management plans.**
- 6. Develop a state-wide web resource for pet owners.**
- 7. Streamline pet identification and registration processes.**
- 8. Make desexing mandatory state-wide.**
- 9. It should be noted that BirdLife Australia does not believe that trap, neuter, release programs will solve issues of cat predation on birds and other wildlife and community cat programs should transition to containment.**

Further research:

- 10. BirdLife Australia believes there should be:**
 - i. investment and collaboration that identifies sources and sinks of cat populations in the landscape, to prioritise actions that minimise interactions between feral cats and domestic cats and other wildlife populations, including birds.**
 - ii. enhanced monitoring of outcomes of cat management actions, along with the consequences for local wildlife, and cat welfare and health.**

For further information or to arrange a meeting please contact BirdLife Australia Senior Adviser Government Relations, Andrew Witheford

Kind regards,

Dr Holly Parsons,
Manager – Priority Sites.

Acting Director Science and Priority Landscapes