

Submission
No 22

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Clarence Environment Centre Inc

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CLARENCE ENVIRONMENT CENTRE

21 November 2024

**The members of the Animal Welfare Committee,
NSW Parliament
Macquarie St
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

By email: animal.welfare@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

The Clarence Environment Centre (CEC) has maintained a proud history of environmental advocacy for more than 30 years. The conservation of our region's natural environment, both terrestrial and aquatic, has always been a priority for our members and we believe the maintenance of healthy ecosystems and biodiversity is of paramount importance.

To this aim, we have consistently expressed concerns regarding the impacts of feral animals and stray companion animals on native species both in towns, in periurban landscapes and in areas of natural bushland on both private and public lands.

The CEC appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the future management of one of the worst and most problematic of the introduced predators in Australia, namely the domestic cat, *Felis catus*. Our comments under each of the Inquiry's terms of reference are outlined below.

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

Predation by feral cats is listed as a key threatening process under both the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*. According to the Commonwealth Department of the Environment (at <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/invasive-species/feral-animals-australia/feral-cats>) :

Feral cats in Australia kill over 1.5 billion native mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs, and 1.1 billion invertebrates each year. Predation by cats is a recognised threat to over 200 nationally threatened species, and 37 listed migratory species. They have contributed to the extinction of more than 20 Australian mammal species, including the pig-footed bandicoots, lesser bilby and broad-faced potoroo. They are a major cause of decline for many land-based threatened animals such as the bilby, bandicoot, bettong and numbat. Many native animals are struggling to survive so reducing the number killed by this introduced predator will assist their populations to grow.

A search on the [NSW threatened biodiversity profile search](#) of species for which cats are listed as a threat, produced a list of 158 threatened species and populations.

However, these impacts are not confined to feral cats. According to the research findings factsheet '[The impact of cats in Australia](#)':

| Pet cats that roam and hunt kill an additional 390 million mammals, birds and reptiles annually.

Research published last year revised this figure to 546 million animals per year in Australia, including some 200 million introduced mammals and birds. In NSW, it is estimated 96 million native mammals,

birds and reptiles are killed by roaming pet cats every year. CEC members, several of whom are also wildlife carers for WIRES, are very concerned about the impact roaming pet cats are having on our native wildlife in the Clarence Valley local government area.

(b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

The CEC wholeheartedly supports amendments to the law to enable local councils to introduce and enforce laws to require cat owners to contain their pet cats to prevent them roaming and hunting native wildlife. These amendments would bring NSW into line with most other states in Australia and treat cats in the same manner as dogs under the NSW *Companion Animals Act*.

NSW's current laws not only allow cats to spend their evenings hunting and killing native animals, they prevent local councils from mandating that cats are contained. This means communities are powerless to institute one of the easiest and highest impact policies to protect their local ecology.

Almost one third of cat owners contain their pets and prevent them roaming. This indicates there is no real physical barrier to introducing policies or laws to require cat containment.

Unfortunately, an estimated 71% of cat owners still allow their pets to roam¹. We can't change the nature of cats, but we can change the culture that allows pet cats to roam and kill. We urgently need responsible pet ownership, and this starts with clear rules to ensure pet owners keep cats contained to their property to save our native wildlife.

(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

Cats that are kept indoors or in enclosures are safer and healthier, and can live up to 10 years longer than cats that roam which are often injured or killed through fighting, car accidents and disease. Several CEC members have indoor or contained cats, and no issues regarding their welfare have been reported.

The law in NSW is a stark contrast to the ACT which requires residents to contain their cats, or in Victoria where nearly 50% of councils have introduced cat containment rules. No welfare issues have been reported in those jurisdictions.

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

A reform introducing cat containment laws should be accompanied by funding for education, compliance and to make desexing and registration easier. Community education programs are effective when it comes to the registration and containment requirements for dogs. It is not unreasonable to expect such programs to be successful for cats.

These responsible pet ownership initiatives should include clear rules around compulsory registration and micro-chipping of cats, and desexing by 4 months of age to prevent unwanted breeding (except for registered breeders).

However, this messaging is only likely to be effective if backed up by laws or policies that are enforceable and for which owners can be fined for breaching.

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

Councils are regulators of the Companion Animals Act. Hence, it must be recognised that responsibility for enforcing cat containment laws would fall to local councils and add to their operating costs. There does not appear to be opposition from councils. As evidenced by motions at Local Government Conferences, many councils are in fact advocating for legislative reforms that allow them to introduce cat containment policies and not just in urban areas (see the article about a call by Wagga Wagga Council at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-26/cat-curfews-nsw-councils-see-more-power-wildlife-protection/101267114>).

¹ Legge S, Woinarski JCZ, Dickman C, Murphy BP, Woolley LA, 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>

The Policy Platform of Local Government NSW includes the following:

13.6 Improvements to regulation of companion animals through:

a) Enabling councils to more effectively manage the nuisance effects of cats on residents and wildlife, including:

- amending legislation to enable local governments to enforce the containment of pet cats in NSW, supported by funding to support implementation and enforcement,
- streamlining the process of animal identification and registration,
- transition to mandatory desexing laws to align with other jurisdictions,
- state-wide awareness and education campaigns for responsible pet ownership,
- empowering councils to take actions to reduce feral cat populations (such as euthanasing feral cats in accordance with animal welfare ethics and a council-adopted policy).

As stated above, a reform introducing cat containment laws should be accompanied by funding for education, compliance and to make desexing and registration easier. Councils should take the lead on these matters and be funded appropriately by the NSW Government to carry out these functions. Such funding could be tied to a requirement for local governments to develop and implement companion animal management plans outlining local arrangements for facilitating responsible cat and dog ownership, as well as wildlife protection areas where dogs and cats are prohibited.

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

The CEC would expect that large scale cat desexing programs would be restricted to pet cats, and be delivered via a subsidy paid directly to veterinary practices.

The CEC would oppose large scale cat desexing programs targeting feral or stray cats with the intention of releasing a desexed cat into the environment. This would do nothing to reduce the predation of feral cats on other animals.

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

The CEC believes that the introduction of cat containment measures, with the addition of other responsible pet ownership measures such as mandatory desexing of all kittens at 4 months of age, will greatly reduce the pressure on the pound system. We understand that the calls by councils to introduce legislation to enable local cat containment policies is primarily due to the cost of impounding and rehoming stray cats.

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

As stated above, the ACT has cat containment legislation, and many councils in Victoria have introduced cat containment policies. Some Councils in other states have too. Most of these policies are relatively recent and so data on outcomes is scarce.

Annual reporting on progress in implementing the [ACT Cat Plan 2021-2031](#) is occurring via the ACT Government. However, monitoring of progress will only occur at the 5-year mark and an evaluation of its implementation and outcomes will occur towards the end of the 10-year plan.

(i) options for reducing the feral cat population

Control of feral cat populations starts with preventing the dumping and straying of pet cats, which is adding to the numbers becoming feral.

Given most feral cats are notoriously trap-shy and avoid taking baits, the effectiveness of many control programs is limited unless accompanied by ground shooting. Shooting is possibly the most humane means of control but is too expensive for most jurisdictions. The CEC understands a team of professional shooters has recently been hired by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service to target cats in some national parks and reserves.

A draft national threat abatement plan (TAP) for feral cats was released for public consultation last year² but is yet to be finalised and adopted. Section 8.4 of the draft plan outlines actions to meet the plan's 'Objective 4: Refine the use of existing tools, and develop new tools, for directly controlling feral cats, and make the tools appropriately accessible'. Consistent with the current TAP, the Commonwealth DCCEEW is funding several projects aimed at feral cat management and threatened species recovery (see <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/feral-cat-projects.pdf>) however it is unclear how successful these are.

Recent trials of the Felixer grooming 'trap' in Flinders Ranges National Park and on King Island are being reported as successful. The Felixer device relies on automated identification of cats passing it and then shooting a small amount of poison onto the cat's fur, which is then ingested as part of the cat's normal grooming habit. It may prove to be the most useful feral cat management device that can be deployed across most landscapes.

Conclusion

The CEC calls on the NSW Government and the Animal Welfare committee to support:

- Amendments to the NSW Companion Animals Act to enable local governments to enforce anti-roaming laws for pet cats at a local level, bringing NSW into line with almost every other state.
- State government funding of a minimum of \$9 million to fund compliance, education, desexing, identification and registration programs.
- Requirements for all local governments to develop companion animal management plans to protect wildlife, as is required in Victoria.
- Development of a statewide web resource for responsible pet ownership.
- Making desexing mandatory state-wide by 4 months of age, as is required in WA, Tasmania, ACT and SA.
- Preparation and implementation of a tenure-blind Threat Abatement Plan targeting feral cat populations in NSW.

Yours sincerely

Mark Purcell
Honorary Secretary

² <https://consult.dcceew.gov.au/draft-updated-threat-abatement-plan-for-predation-by-feral-cats>