

Submission
No 35

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Munibung Hill Conservation Society

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From: Munibung Hill Conservation Society (MHCS)

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Submission to: NSW Legislative Council inquiry into the management of pet cat populations in NSW.

Subject: Companion Animals Act 1998 No.87 (NSW) amendment recommendation

Background

We refer to two enquiries that essentially reach the same conclusion: that roaming domestic cats are a major threat to native wildlife, and that cat containment is an effective means to control them and relieve the pressure on wildlife predation as it relates to introduced species i.e. over and above the background rate of natural predation within the native animal ecosystem. The most recent NSW report is noted at (1) with the earlier Federal government report at (2).

- (1) The recent release of the **NSW Biodiversity Outlook Report**, prepared by former Treasury Secretary Ken Henry, provides the government with the ideal opportunity to tick off one action that would go a long way to helping achieve a reduction in the loss of biodiversity, and at the same time bring the state into line with other jurisdictions that have seen fit to reform such laws in their respective states.

Ken Henry recommended that the NSW state government take a 'nature positive' approach by which nature is improved, not just maintained.

What is needed is a reversal of the current trend, which is producing ever diminishing numbers of native animals and ever-increasing numbers of feral and roaming domestic cats – the exact opposite of what an environmental conservation approach needs to not just promote, but deliver, in real terms, on the ground, in the forested bushland, in and around the suburbs of Lake Macquarie and beyond.

The natural world can only take so much punishment*. It is well documented, that one of those punishing acts is carried out by roaming domestic cats, allowed to roam by their irresponsible owners who claim they do no harm, would never lift a paw to bring down a native animal and certainly never do such a horrible thing like killing a bird or lizard or juvenile bandicoot.

This as we know flies in the face of all the science that has been telling us for years that roaming domestic cats are one of the primary predators across the country – along with their feral cousins. We would be pleased to supply further supporting documentation as required.

- (2) The Federal **State of the Environment Report (SOE) 2021** when it was released made for disturbing reading. Regardless of whether it is reported by *The Guardian*: **State of the environment: shocking report shows how Australia's land and wildlife are being gradually destroyed**, or *News.com*: **Albanese government releases 'shocking' report 5 years in the making - A "disturbing" report that had been kept hidden for months has been revealed, and it paints a grim picture for Australia's future**. Catie McLeod and Ellen Ransley, July 19, 2022. *NCA NewsWire*; or the *CSIRO*: **Expert Commentary: State of the Environment (SOE) 2021 - Experts from Australia's national science agency, CSIRO, who contributed as authors to the State of the Environment 2021 Report share insights about the new publication**, the content describes successive failures and insufficient determination to stem these failures and the consequential decline.

Adam Morton and Graham Readfearn (*The Guardian*, Tue 19 Jul 2022) [as referenced above] report that:

The health of Australia's environment is poor and has deteriorated over the past five years due to pressures of climate change, habitat loss, invasive species, pollution and mining, according to a government report that warns the natural world holds the key to human wellbeing and survival.

The SOE report quoted the World Economic Forum in finding that environmental degradation was now considered a threat to humanity that could "bring about societal collapses with long-lasting and severe consequences".

Prof Euan Ritchie, from the Centre for Integrative Ecology at Deakin University, said the report was authoritative, long overdue and confirmed "Australia's utter failure of environmental and conservation stewardship".

Australia has lost more mammal species than any other continent, and has one of the highest rates of species decline in the developed world. More than 100 Australian species have been listed as either extinct or extinct in the wild. The major causes of extinction were introduced species and habitat destruction and clearing, write Morton and Readfern.

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Rationale and justification

As it currently stands, domestic cats are free to roam beyond their registered place of residence, their owners not being obliged under the Companion Animals Act to keep them contained, in spite of the well-known and documented detrimental impact on indigenous native animals (as noted later in this paper).

Roaming domestic cats, daily, add to the impact of existing feral cats already present in local bushland reserves, parks and neighbourhood backyards. There can be no separation when it comes to dealing with this issue – the boundary lines drawn on maps (and fences) mean nothing to roaming domestic cats. And for native animals there is no distinction between those that are feral and those that are of a domestic origin – they are all to be feared and avoided where-ever possible. For example cats have been photographed perched on a nest box waiting for a possum to emerge – cats have the advantage of being able to scale and climb trees in search of their prey. Since many of the bushland reserves are effectively islands, surrounded by suburbia, it adds to the urgency to come to terms with the impact of cats. They can return to the safety of their owner’s dwellings, an option not available to native wildlife, who without any interlinking terrestrial corridors, have been effectively confined, which adds to their already dire circumstances.

In the case of roaming domestic cats, this is one of those issues that can be considered low hanging fruit, since the science over many years is already consistently finding that the impact of roaming domestic cats is substantial and increasing, but measures to take the pressure off native animals are readily available.

It can be easily addressed with a simple amendment to the Companion Animals Act 1998 No.87, that would permit local government the authority to introduce curfew and containment requirements on domestic cat owners within their jurisdiction.

This is the case in other states, but not NSW. It is well known that cats are better off, live longer and healthier lives when kept indoors, making this a win-win for all concerned.

In addition, it is a glaring anomaly, whereby it is an offence to harm or willfully kill native wildlife, but it is not an offence to release a known hunting animal – in this case domestic cats – into the territory of native animals ranging from harmless blue-tongued lizards and birds in a neighbour’s backyard, to bandicoots and other small mammals in nearby bushland. By extension we are overseeing the killing of native animals and giving preference to one species introduced only 250 years ago - downplaying the harm done to and decline of indigenous native species that have lived and contributed so much to the health of ecosystems for tens of thousands of years.

This change to the CAA will in no way contribute to the decline of the introduced domestic cat species, but it will help stem the decline of native animal species, that we claim to care so much about. It is widely known that keeping cats safe at home, is in their best interests. It also places cats on the same plane as dogs, not being allowed to roam without supervision beyond their places of residence.

Proposal

Reform of the Companion Animals Act 1998 No.87, by way of an amendment that would permit local government the authority to introduce curfew and containment requirements on domestic cat owners within their jurisdiction.

Supporting evidence is everywhere to be found and cross-over concern leaves no one out.

Precedents exist in other states, where local government is empowered to introduce and enforce containment programs. Two outstanding examples are Bendigo Municipality in Victoria and Banana Shire in Queensland.

Since this proposal crosses all electorates, all political viewpoint, all socio-economic backgrounds and comes with strong support from those on the front line of dealing with the cost of caring for injured native animals i.e. wildlife rescue groups across the state, who witness the harm done on a daily basis, it would be helpful to reach a bi-partisan position on this issue.

References:

Cat curfew in Bendigo more strict, councillors unanimous on limiting cats to properties 24/7

ABC Central Victoria / By Tyrone Dalton. 16 Nov 2021

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-16/greater-bendigo-councillors-unanimous-on-strict-new-cat-curfew/100623966>

Greater Bendigo residents will have to keep their cats confined to their properties all day and all night after councillors unanimously voted in a new, stricter cat curfew policy.

Key points:

- The new rule requires cats to stay inside the fence line day and night
- Previous rules required cats to be kept inside the property overnight
- A survey found 80 per cent of respondents were in favour of the new policy
- The policy could mean some cat owners will have to keep their pets inside 24 hours a day to avoid them going outside of the property.

Pet plan passes – City of Greater Bendigo council meeting briefs.

November 18, 2021. Jonathon Magrath, Bendigo Times.

<https://timesnewsgroup.com.au/bendigotimes/news/pet-plan-passes-city-of-greater-bendigo-council-meeting-briefs/>

Do you know where your cat is at night?

Banana Shire Council, Queensland. 27th August 2021

The impact domestic and feral cats have on our native wildlife is phenomenal! Not to mention the diseases they can carry and transfer to our domesticated pets. Like all Queensland Councils, Banana Shire Council enforces that all cats (and dogs) must be kept within your property. To assist in controlling the destruction of native animals, transmission of diseases and unwanted breeding, Council has begun trapping programs throughout the Shire.

<https://www.banana.qld.gov.au/news/article/322/do-you-know-where-your-cat-is-at-night->

<https://www.banana.qld.gov.au/downloads/file/5084/keeping-cats-fact-sheet>

Also ...

Among the Pigeons: why cats belong indoors by John Read - a leading ecologist.

He notes that cats are best contained to keep them safe but first and foremost to keep native animals safe. See quote below ... ***

<https://pages.facebook.com/JohnReadThePragmaticEcologist/photos/a.353275394733803/1062271423834193/?type=3>

Among the pigeons: why cats belong indoors.

Author John L. Read, book review by Dave Rose

This fascinating book offers a telling insight into the conundrum raised by conflicting appraisals of the enigma of the domestic cat. How can a cuddly, purring household pet be transformed into a sleek, feline killing machine once it steps outside the threshold and makes the outdoors its domain?

As ecologist and author John Read tells us, alas this is the nature of the beast. The statistics relating to the damage that rampant cats can inflict on Australian native species are staggering. In this country cats threaten various species of mammals, with many extinct due to just that interference, birds and reptiles. It is estimated 377 million birds and 650 million reptiles perish each year at the hands of rogue moggies. Outdoor cats can also spread diseases - including toxoplasmosis. As well as Australia, Read travels and observes extensively as the cat poser is a global happening.

<https://greataustralianoutdoors.com.au/among-the-pigeons-why-our-cats-belong-indoors-by-john-l-read/>

Aliens among us

Invasive Species Council - Third session with ecologist and author John Read.

Our third Aliens Among Us session welcomed John Read, ecologist and author of *Among the Pigeons; Why our cats belong indoors*. John is considered by some to be Australia's leading expert on the impacts of feral and roaming cats, and this is a special opportunity to see the world of cats through his eyes.

Alongside John was our expert panel consisting of former Tasmanian Senator Christine Milne, author Tim Low and Invasive Species Council CEO Andrew Cox.

<https://invasives.org.au/resources/aliens-among-us-the-qa-sessions/>

John Read, ecologist in conversation with Steve Crawford and Adrian Sherriff

They chat with guests about some of the most unique and fascinating wildlife on Earth.

<https://aussiewildlifeshow.podbean.com/e/dr-john-read-wildlife-ecologist/>

Targeted Ecosystem Project: Domestic Cat Awareness and Feral Cat Control activities

Colleen Farrow – Senior Land Services Officer, NSW Central Tablelands.

Why be concerned about cats?

*** '[They] eat falcons and cockatoos, bats, centipedes, scorpions. I imagine that they would have a hard time pulling down a saltwater crocodile, I imagine that cassowaries would be pretty safe, but virtually every lizard, every snake, every frog, every bat, just about every bird in Australia and any mammal smaller than a large kangaroo, at least when they are joeys, are all susceptible to cat predation.'

Dr. John Read, ecologist.

We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife

Sarah Legge, John C. Z. Woinarski,, Chris R. Dickman D , Brett P. Murphy C , Leigh-Ann Woolley and Mike C. Calver. 20 April, 2020.

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

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Action to reverse the trend: NSW biodiversity outlook report - 8 May 2024

The **NSW biodiversity outlook report 2024** covers a large range of indicators from 2007 to 2023, to give a representation of the status and trends of biodiversity across New South Wales. This is the second biodiversity outlook report – the first was published in 2020.

One of the key findings in the report states that:

- There are more than 300 invasive weeds and 36 pest animal species across New South Wales, with red foxes and feral cats observed in almost every bioregion.

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/news/action-to-reverse-the-trend-nsw-biodiversity-outlook-report>

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Minister for the Environment Penny Sharpe said:

“We cannot ignore the truth: biodiversity in NSW is in crisis. Our goal must be to leave nature better off than we have found it.

“The independent review of the Biodiversity Conservation Act showed we need to take a number of reform measures not just to protect the biodiversity we have now, but to build on this baseline and do better. Our response to this review is that we are ready to take on that challenge.

“It’s clear we need new approaches, and that additional effort must be directed into proactive landscape-scale biodiversity protection, restoration, and management. We must go beyond the aim of halting loss to one of achieving overall ecosystem gains.

“The response sets out our immediate priorities and directions, but this is the start of concerted action, reform, investment.”

<https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/nsw-plan-for-nature>

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*** Strong progress – from a low base: here’s what’s in NSW’s biodiversity reforms**, The Conversation, Published: July 19, 2024

Hugh Possingham, Professor of Conservation Biology, The University of Queensland; Carolyn Hogg, Deputy Director, Sydney Environment Institute. Co-Lead Australasian Wildlife Genomics Group, University of Sydney; Jaana Dielenberg, University Fellow in Biodiversity, Charles Darwin University.

The laws designed to protect the environment in New South Wales are completely ineffective, according to the scathing Henry Review in 2023.

In response, the state government this week announced a major overhaul of the Biodiversity Conservation Act, introduced in 2016. The Minns government has committed to introducing 49 of 58 recommendations made by the review, either in full or in part.

..... And later

We often take biodiversity for granted. Trees, shrubs, mammals, birds, insects, fish – they’ll always be there. But the natural world can only take so much punishment. Humans are also part of the natural world. We rely much more on functioning ecosystems than we would like to think

<https://theconversation.com/strong-progress-from-a-low-base-heres-whats-in-nsws-biodiversity-reforms-234917>
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International Cat Day – 8th August 2024

An email from the RSPCA, 6 August, 2024 stated that ...

They're furry, independent, full of sass and purr like no one's business. We love cats and what better time to celebrate our furry friends than with 'International Cat Day'?

Did you know that 2 in 3 cat owners have lost a cat to a roaming-related accident: 1 in 3 to a car accident! That is why RSPCA NSW has created the Keeping Cats Safe at Home campaign to encourage those who have a cat in their lives to keep them safe from harm – at home.

The good news is with the help of Catnets, you can provide your beloved cats with the freedom they crave, all while ensuring their safety.

And in a previous release ...

“We know that roaming can be very dangerous for cats. Unfortunately, we see this daily through our RSPCA NSW shelters and veterinary clinics, and we want to support, encourage and equip cat owners to successfully transition their cats to a safe-at-home lifestyle,” said Dr. Gemma Ma, RSPCA NSW Keeping Cats Safe at Home Project Manager.

For Munibung Hill Conservation Society (MHCS), our priority is keeping wildlife safe from roaming cats.

Both priorities – keeping cats safe, and protecting wildlife from roaming domestic cats - can be achieved by keeping cats contained indoors or in a dedicated cat enclosure.