Submission No 41

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Campus Cats NSW

Date Received: 22 November 2024

NSW Legislative Council's Animal Welfare Committee Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in New South Wales

Submission on behalf of: Campus Cats NSW

Prepared by: Emeritus Professor Helen Swarbrick, President, Campus Cats NSW

The registered animal welfare charity Campus Cats NSW appreciates the opportunity to submit the following to the NSW Legislative Council's Animal Welfare Committee Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in New South Wales. This submission specifically addresses Terms of Reference point (f) – the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large-scale cat desexing programs.

Recommendations

1. That the State Government directs Councils to develop and implement large-scale targeted cat desexing programs. Under these programs, desexing, microchipping, vaccination and parasite control should be delivered free of charge or at low cost.

2. That the State Government provides appropriate funding, to be administered by Councils, to financially support the conduct of large-scale cat desexing programs.

3. That the State Government amends Section 11 of the POCTA Act to specifically legalise Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) methods for managing owned, semi-owned and unowned domestic cats.

Introduction

Campus Cats NSW was formed in 2008 with the specific purpose of managing homeless cats living on the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Kensington campus, through a trap-neuter-return program, daily feeding of all cats, and maintenance of animal health and welfare. The charity is registered with the ACNC, is run as a volunteer charity and is funded completely by donations from the public.

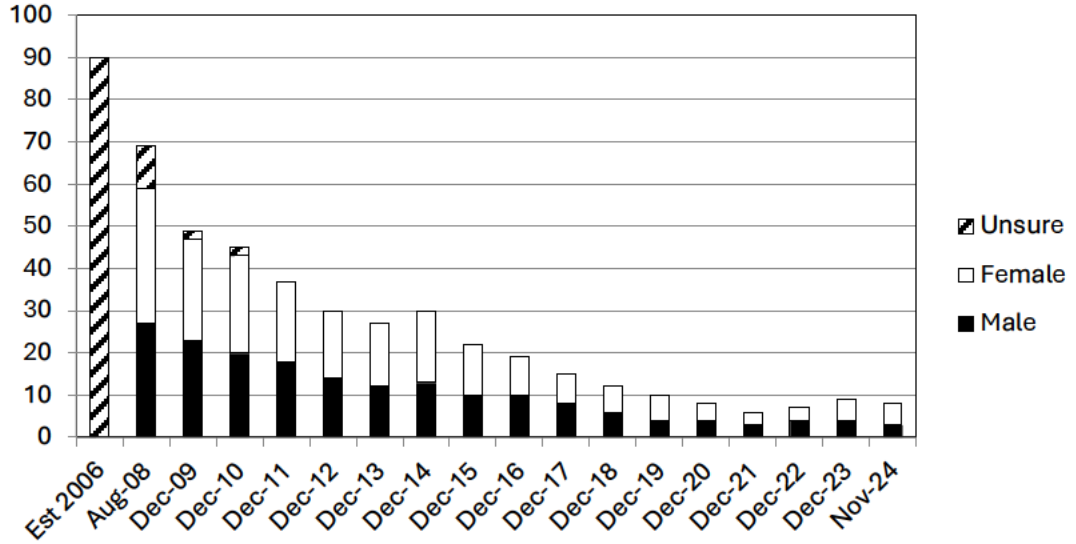

Figure 1: Cat numbers on UNSW Kensington campus from 2006 to present. The management program formally commenced in August 2008.

This submission describes the conduct and outcomes of a successful large-scale cat desexing and management program conducted at UNSW over the last 17 years. The report clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of a humane approach to the management of free-living (stray) cat populations that involves trapping, desexing, microchipping, preventive care, and return to the home range, followed by regular feeding, monitoring and maintenance.

We present a summary of key learnings from our 17 years of experience with this management approach, and recommendations aimed to optimise future approaches to cat management through state government-based development of large-scale cat desexing programs, provision of funding to support the work of Councils and cat welfare and rescue groups that conduct cat desexing programs, and legislative change.

Background
In August 2008, UNSW and Campus Cats NSW commenced a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program to manage a population of approximately 70 free-roaming unowned urban cats that lived at that time on the Kensington campus. Prior to formal commencement of the university-approved program, up to 90 free-roaming cats had lived on the campus, based on estimates by campus-based observers from mid-2006.

The goals of the program included an audit of cats on campus, stabilisation of cat numbers through TNR, and subsequent reduction in cat numbers over time while maintaining the health of remaining campus cats. After humane trapping, the cats were desexed, microchipped, vaccinated, treated for parasites, and returned to the campus site where they had been trapped. Cats were then fed daily, and monitored directly by carers and using motion-detection trail cameras. Where indicated, veterinary intervention was initiated to maintain the health of the cats. All cats were lifetime registered through the local council on the NSW Companion Animals Register.

Outcomes (2008 – 2017)
In 2018 the outcomes of the university-approved program up to September 2017 were published as follows:

Swarbrick H, Rand J (2018). Application of a protocol based on trap-neuter-return (TNR) to manage unowned urban cats on an Australian university campus. Animals 8, 7; doi:10.3390/ani8050077

This paper, in a peer-reviewed open access scientific journal, has subsequently been cited 52 times (according to ResearchGate, 20 November 2024).

Over the first 9 years (2008-2017) the university-approved program significantly reduced the campus cat population to 15 cats, all desexed (15/69; 78% reduction). In addition to the original cats, regular monitoring through a daily feeding program identified a further 34 cats that immigrated on to campus over 9 years, including 28 adult and 6 kittens. In addition, 19 kittens were born on campus. Unsocialised adult immigrants were absorbed into the resident campus population. Socialised adult immigrants, solitary kittens and campus-born kittens were removed from campus through rehoming.

Overall, reasons for reductions in the cat population (original residents, immigrants, campus-born kittens; *n* = 122) over 9 years included rehoming or return to owner (30%), death/euthanasia (30%) and disappearance (29%).

Current Situation (2018 – 2024)
The program continues today with university approval. There has been a modest reduction and stabilisation of campus cat numbers between September 2017 and November 2024. None of the original campus cats from 2008 are still alive. The last of these cats died (at the age of 18 years) in February 2024.

Of the 15 cats living on campus in 2017, 12 are no longer on campus. Since 2017, a further 7 cats have immigrated on to the campus, of which 5 remain. The 8 cats currently on campus (3 male, 5 female) are all immigrant cats that continue to be managed using our established principles.

In addition to the campus cats managed through our charity, 10 other cats have appeared transiently on campus since 2017, typically staying on campus for only a few days-weeks. Of these, 2 cats were returned to their owners, 3 socialised cats were adopted, and 5 cats disappeared, presumably returning into the surrounding suburbs.

Over the last 7 years, we have had to deal with some unplanned situations:

- The discovery of four kittens abandoned by an unknown person at an established feeding site. All were successfully rehomed.

- The location of a new colony of cats (4 adults, 4 kittens) on a part of campus where we had not previously known there were free-living cats. All kittens were rehomed, adults underwent TNR, and 2 adult cats from this colony remain on campus.

Our ongoing management of immigrant cats and transient visitors demonstrates the crucial importance of maintaining active management of free-living cat populations after the initial success of reducing and stabilising cat numbers.

Expenses and Funding Support
We are a small charity and rely completely on donations to fund our operations. Although the university approves our campus activity, they have provided no funding since 2008, when they made an initial $9,000 contribution to support the first wave of desexing. All program costs are currently covered by donations and fundraising activities, which have yielded on average $7,500 per annum over the last 7 years.

The major expense for our charity has been veterinary costs relating to the initial desexing, microchipping, vaccination and parasite control of cats trapped on campus. We have the support of some local veterinary practices that have provided these services at reduced charity rates, but over the program the costs to the charity for these veterinary services has been substantial. In addition, where necessary we have trapped unwell cats for veterinary care – this has contributed significantly to our veterinary expenses. Since 2018, euthanasia of 4 very unwell older cats on veterinary advice has been necessary. We have also incurred significant veterinary expenses for older cats

that developed illnesses requiring diagnosis and prolonged treatment. Over the last 7 years (2017-2024), annual veterinary costs have averaged $4,250 (range $198 - $8,818).

Daily feeding continues to be conducted by a team of student and staff volunteers, using food purchased from donations to the charity. The supply of cat food for student feeders has been our second major expense. Over the last 7 years, annual food bills have averaged $2,500.

In an annual expenditure budget averaging $7,550, other administrative and maintenance costs for the program are impressively low, at an average of $800 per annum (~10% of budget).

Terminology and Definitions

The term "trap-neuter-return" (TNR) was originally used to characterise our approach to cat management at the outset of our program. We are very aware of the ongoing controversy over use of TNR in NSW, due to the potential for this to be an illegal activity because of the provisions of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (POCTA) Act specifically in relation to abandonment of cats (Section 11).

We argue that our management protocols do not constitute abandonment, as all cats who were managed through the program continued to be fed daily and monitored regularly by our cat care team of volunteer students, staff and community members. Thus we argue that our cat management approach does not involve abandonment under the meaning of the POCTA Act. It would be interesting to have this assertion tested in a court of law.

Currently the terminology "Community Cat Management Program" (CCMP) has been used for management approaches that involve trapping (where necessary), desexing, microchipping, vaccination and return of cats to their community owners or caretakers. Our program of campus cat management resembles the CCMP model, and we would argue that this terminology could reasonably be used to characterise the UNSW campus cat program.

Key Learnings

- Well-managed large-scale cat desexing programs based on TNR principles can be very effective in reducing free-living (stray) cat populations. The population reduction can be rapid (~50% reduction in 2-3 years), particularly if female cats are prioritised for desexing.
- The cat population can further be reduced by rehoming of kittens and socialised cats through adoption.
- It is important to maintain vigilance after the cat population is stabilised in order to manage immigrant cats entering from the surrounding area.
- Cat welfare after TNR must be ensured by regular feeding and monitoring to maintain the health of remaining cats.

Detailed Recommendations

In relation to the inquiry's Terms of Reference (f), which asks about the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large-scale cat desexing programs, Campus Cats NSW makes the following detailed recommendations:

1. That the State Government directs Councils to develop and implement large-scale cat desexing programs that are targeted primarily at areas that generate large numbers of cat-related complaints, that are associated with high numbers of surrendered and impounded cats into Council pounds and rescue shelters, and/or are known to have significant populations of poorly managed owned, semi-owned and unowned cats. Under these programs, desexing, microchipping, vaccination and parasite control should be delivered free of charge or at low cost.

2. That the State Government provides appropriate funding, to be administered by Councils, to financially support the conduct of large-scale cat desexing programs, whether these are delivered directly by Council staff or by volunteer cat welfare and rescue groups.

3. That the State Government reviews and amends the relevant section of the POCTA Act (Section 11) to specifically legalise Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) methods where these are conducted by suitably approved cat welfare and rescue groups, and where these include measures to ensure ongoing care and welfare for desexed cats after return to their home territory.

Emeritus Professor Helen Swarbrick
President, Campus Cats NSW

22/11/2024