

**Submission
No 61**

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Northern Beaches Council

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Animal Welfare Committee
NSW Legislative Council
animal.welfare@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Our Ref: 2024/789394

Dear Sir/Madam,

INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment to the NSW Legislative Council's Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations in New South Wales. Northern Beaches Council has a long-standing commitment to working with the community and key stakeholders to address the environmental impacts of feral and domestic cats.

Please find below our response to matters outlined in the inquiry's terms of reference.

a. The impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings

Cats are skilled hunters and will hunt even when well fed. An international review by Legge et al (2020) found that predation rates by domestic cats were sometimes more than twice that of feral cats in urban areas, and estimated that roaming pet cats killed approximately 390 million animals annually. Evidence indicates that possums, small birds, ground dwelling mammals and lizards are among the native animals most significantly impacted by domestic cats.

Large numbers of cat attacks are reported to local wildlife rescue volunteer agencies annually. A review of local statistics indicates that after motor vehicle collisions, cat attacks are among the leading cause of wildlife injury and death reported to agencies. The true number of predation events is likely to be substantially greater than that reported to rescue agencies, as many native animals die before rescue or go unreported altogether.

For example:

- a three-year University of NSW study at Manly-Warringah War Memorial Park (Manly Dam) on the Northern Beaches found that cat predation accounted for the loss of 37% of the sample ringtail possum population;

- a four-year study by Sydney Metropolitan Wildlife Service found that 70-80% of all recorded ringtail possum injuries/mortalities could be attributed to cat attack; and
- a 2006 University of Sydney study also found that the ringtail possum is frequently predated upon by cats in bushland and urban habitats.

Furthermore, recently published research conducted on the Northern Beaches (Kennedy, Clemann and Ma, 2024) found that roaming domestic cats readily frequented Sydney Harbour National Park from residential areas, with 11 individual cats identified across 50 detection events throughout the study period.

The study site is an area of high biodiversity value, encompassing habitat for threatened eastern pygmy-possums, the endangered long-nosed bandicoot population, and the endangered little penguin population. Given the limited regulatory tools for managing this threat, roaming cats may arguably pose an equal risk to the area's threatened wildlife as European foxes, for which control options are more readily available.

b. The effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

Council receives more than 100 complaints annually from the public regarding domestic cats roaming and hunting in neighbouring yards and bushland reserves. Despite the community's concerns about this issue, the NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 provides limited tools for Council to respond to and action such requests. In contrast, the Victorian Domestic Animals Act 1994 enables councils to require cats to be confined to the premises within a declared area.

Amendments to the Companion Animals Act to allow for localised and/or LGA-wide cat containment requirements (e.g. curfews or containment to the property) would potentially yield the most immediate, cost effective and significant benefit to councils trying to manage the ecological impacts of domestic cats within a legislative framework that is not currently fit for purpose.

c. Welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

Whilst it would seem there are currently few scientific studies available regarding the welfare of contained cats, there are still some undeniable benefits for both cats and wildlife. The RSPCA cites the following statistics and benefits:

- reducing the risk of them getting sick or being injured
- reducing the risk they will stray and be lost or impounded by the council
- minimising the risk they will harm or kill other animals

- preventing them from interacting with un-desexed roaming cats (e.g., fighting or breeding)
- avoiding cat-related problems with your neighbours
- prevents the risk of being hit or run over by a car
- being attacked by a dog
- fighting with other neighbourhood cats
- acquiring a serious infection, such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)
- eating toxic plants or poisons
- being stolen or abused
- picking up ticks or fleas
- being bitten by a venomous snake
- gives them a better chance to enjoy a longer, safer life

It is also worth noting that cat containment does not need to mean an unstimulating life deprived of the outdoors. Cat enclosures (along with furnishings, behavioural enrichment toys, vantage points and sleeping areas) can provide access to outdoor environments such as gardens, balconies and verandas that satisfy a cat's desire for the outdoors and associated behaviours whilst keeping them and local wildlife safe. Cat enclosures are also evolving and there are now many innovative and adaptable designs available to cater for a number of living situations whether within apartment blocks, townhouses or free-standing homes with backyards.

d. The effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives

Council Compliance officers have undertaken a range of community education initiatives to encourage responsible cat ownership, including cat enclosure giveaways, pop-up stalls and information events, which have been effective in raising awareness about responsible pet ownership and other animal management issues.

Council's Bushland and Biodiversity officers have also delivered a number of community biodiversity events promoting the RSPCA Keeping Cats Safe at Home grant and the community response has been overwhelmingly positive. Furthermore, a key initiative delivered under the RSPCA's 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home' grant has been an annual cat enclosure photo competition, which has been very well supported by the local community and has highlighted that the public are aware of the need to protect wildlife and are already on a journey of understanding and behavioural change.

Despite the improvements in community awareness facilitated by these initiatives, education can only go so far without effective regulatory mechanisms to allow councils to manage the impact of roaming cats. Education is only one component

in addressing a complex issue which demands a multi-pronged approach, including a fit-for-purpose legislative framework.

e. Implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies

The introduction of regulatory and/or policy tools for implementing and enforcing cat containment policies would likely result in additional resourcing pressures for councils, many of which are not financially equipped to expand existing animal management operations. However, it is clear that the current NSW model is failing to meet community expectations around the need to protect native wildlife from cats. Northern Beaches Council has sought to respond to this through its advocacy, education and community outreach initiatives, and would welcome support from the NSW Government to ensure that we can improve outcomes for wildlife and meet community expectations. Should cat containment policies be implemented in NSW, this support may include provision of financial assistance (e.g. for compliance and/or education staff positions) and training for councils so that they are adequately resourced to support delivery of the NSW Government's policy objectives.

f. The effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs.

Low desexing rates contribute significantly to cat overpopulation and the number of unowned and feral cats, which in turn exacerbates the impacts of cats on wildlife. Council is supportive of measures to increase desexing rates in NSW. It is noted that the Draft Victorian Cat Management Strategy (Victoria Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, January 2024) sets out a suite of actions aimed at increasing cat desexing rates. The State Government should investigate the benefits of implementing such a model in NSW.

g. The impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system

There is only one provider within the Northern Beaches LGA and as such, it is difficult to characterise potential impacts of cat containment measures on the pound system. However, it is likely that the pound system may experience an increase in intake numbers, and associated workload and costs, as a result of any new cat containment measures. It is recommended that the implementation of any new measures to encourage containment be accompanied by an appropriate level of support (financial or otherwise) for pound providers.

h. The outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories

Based on limited review of the approach taken by other states and territories, it appears Victoria has adopted a more progressive approach and is taking action on cats with legislation and ongoing review, consultation and improvements in both education and enforcement, see Draft Victorian Cat Management Strategy <https://engage.vic.gov.au/cat-management-strategy>

i. Options for reducing the feral cat population

Roaming domestic cats (owned, semi-owned and unowned) are more likely to become feral and/or reproduce than contained domestic cats, which contributes to the feral cat population. Stronger regulations around roaming domestic cats would therefore assist in reducing the feral cat population.

In addition, the current NSW legislation does not distinguish between feral and domestic cats, which inhibits the successful delivery of feral cat control programs to support threatened species recovery. There is also a lack of clarity around the legality of various compliance options when cats do not fall into one of the aforementioned definitions (e.g. semi-owned, unowned, abandoned), making enforcement of some nuisance cats almost impossible. As such, it is considered that the Companion Animals Act should be amended to clarify different cat definitions based on ownership status and behaviour to enable lawful management of feral cats whilst reducing the incidence of domestic cats becoming stray or feral.

Should you require any further information or assistance in this matter, please contact my office on .

Yours faithfully,

Executive Manager Environment and Climate Change
Northern Beaches Council

References

Kennedy B, Clemann A, Ma G (2024) Feline encounters Down Under: investigating the activity of cats and native wildlife at Sydney's North Head. *Animals* **14**(7), 2485. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/14/17/2485>

Legge S, Woinarski J, Dickman C, Murphy B, Woolley L and Calver M (2020) We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife. *Wildlife Research* **47**, 523–539. <https://www.publish.csiro.au/wr/pdf/WR19174>