

Submission
No 62

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

Date Received: 21 November 2024



PEOPLE FOR
THE ETHICAL
TREATMENT
OF ANIMALS

**SUBMISSION TO THE NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
ANIMAL WELFARE COMMITTEE INQUIRY
INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS**

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22 NOVEMBER 2024

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A) About PETA Australia

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) Australia is part of the world's largest animal rights community – PETA entities have more than 9 million members and supporters worldwide. PETA is dedicated to establishing and protecting the rights of all animals and operates under the simple principle that animals are not ours to experiment on, eat, wear, use for entertainment, or abuse in any other way.

PETA works through public education, cruelty investigations, research, lobbying, celebrity involvement, and protest campaigns to focus international attention on the exploitation and abuse of animals as living test tubes in laboratories, for their flesh, for their skin, and for entertainment.

B) General comments on the scope of PETA's response to select terms of reference

The NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee is seeking submissions from the public to the subject inquiry and has invited PETA to provide a submission. PETA's comments in response to select issues raised by the terms of reference are below.

PETA advocates for the rights of all animals and is particularly concerned with measures that may affect their welfare. Therefore, our comments are necessarily focused on recommendations likely to minimise suffering and maximise positive welfare outcomes.

C) PETA's responses to select issues raised by the terms of reference

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

The issue of homeless and roaming cats raises debate around the welfare and safety not only of cats but also of native and wild animals.

Given that humans introduced cats, allowed their numbers to grow unchecked, and encroached on native animal habitats, driving wild animals into urban areas where they have met with an overpopulation of cats who hunt them, it's humankind's imperative to find long-term, humane solutions.

In addition to the millions of cats with homes in Australia, an estimated 2.8 million cats are homeless,ⁱ and this figure grows constantly. But domestic cats in general – not just homeless ones – pose a risk to wildlife, as 71% of companion (housed) cats are allowed to roam.ⁱⁱ

Homeless or not, cats instinctively hunt live animals, and they kill over 2 billion reptiles, birds, and mammals per year in Australia.ⁱⁱⁱ Roaming housed cats kill some 66 million native animals each year in Sydney alone.^{iv} And homeless cats kill 1.5 billion native mammals, birds, reptiles, and frogs and 1.1 billion invertebrates annually across the country.^v Over 200 nationally threatened species and 37 listed migratory species are at risk of feline predation.^{vi}

2. The effectiveness and benefits of implementing large-scale cat desexing programmes

Any serious strategy to reduce cat numbers and the threat they pose to other animals must start with stemming the flow of new animals into a world where there are not enough homes for them. Humans are responsible for deliberately increasing cat populations as well as the reproduction of unfixed roaming and homeless cats.

Every animal bought from a breeder costs one in a shelter the chance of a loving home, contributing to the euthanasia of animals in shelters. Council shelters are overflowing, putting pressure on staff and denying new animals in need safe spaces. Australian shelters and pounds must euthanise some 50,000 healthy cats and kittens a year,^{vii} yet 25% of cats – 1.32 million in 2022 – are still being purchased from breeders directly or via pet stores.^{viii}

If the bought animal is not desexed and reproduces, the problem is compounded. A single free-roaming, unfixed cat can give rise to as many as 5,000 cats in seven years.^{ix} Extensive and readily available desexing programmes made affordable via state government subsidies must therefore be coupled with legislation banning the breeding and sale of animals by breeders, kitten farms, pet stores, and online operators to stem the flow of new animals.

Desexing also improves the welfare of individual animals. Spaying eliminates female feline stress and discomfort during heat periods, eliminates the uterine cancer risk, and greatly reduces mammary cancer risk. One study found that spaying cats younger than 1 year old was associated with an 86% reduction in the risk of developing mammary gland neoplasia.^x

Neutering makes males far less likely to roam or fight, prevents testicular cancer, and reduces the risk of prostate cancer.^{xi} Altered animals are less likely to contract deadly, contagious diseases, such as feline AIDS and feline leukaemia, which are spread through bodily fluids.^{xii}

3. The effectiveness of cat containment policies and welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

Cats can happily live indoors or in secure outdoor cat runs (or a combination of the two), provided they have access to enrichment, such as toys, a feline companion, puzzle feeders, scratching posts, human-interactive games that encourage exercise, and shelves, levels, and cat trees for climbing. And 92% of Australians support or do not oppose 24/7 at-home cat containment.^{xiii}

Allowing cats to roam outside the home is dangerous not only for wildlife but also for the cats themselves, who are at risk of disease, being hit by cars, or becoming the victims of cruel people. Cats responsibly contained at home can live up to 10 years longer than those allowed to roam free.^{xiv}

4. Options for reducing the feral cat population

Cat management strategies must be focused on humane ways of addressing the root cause of overpopulation, not employing cruel, dangerous lethal measures.

Poisoning as a cat control measure, for example, is counterintuitive to protecting wildlife. Sodium fluoroacetate (colloquially 1080), which is commonly used in cat baits, is an environmental disaster. It is easily ingested by companion animals as well as native species, and its victims endure a slow, agonising death.^{xv}

Similarly, shooting cats is cruel. Shooting moving targets, which is usually done at night, can result in inaccurate shots and cause prolonged, painful death.^{xvi}

In regard to tackling the root causes of overpopulation, it is not enough to rely on reactionary control methods, such as the impounding of animals identified as having homes and the killing of homeless animals. PETA urges the New South Wales government to consider the following preventive measures to reduce cat populations:

- A ban on the sale of animals by breeders, in pet stores, and online
- A ban on kitten farms
- The enforcement of 24/7 cat confinement laws
- Continuation of mandatory microchipping
- Increased public education about the importance of cat desexing, at-home confinement (including environmental enrichment), fostering, and adoption
- Increased state government funding of adoption groups and shelters to better house impounded animals and enhance rehoming efforts
- Government funding of desexing programmes

- In cases where it is necessary, euthanasia – and an end to cruel, inaccurate lethal methods such as shooting and poisoning

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

Enforcing cat containment measures, banning the breeding and sale of animals, and mandating desexing would stem overpopulation and therefore have a positive impact on the pound system, taking considerable pressure off animal shelters.

The 2023 Legislative Council inquiry into pounds in NSW heard that the underfunding of pounds by state and local governments hinders animal welfare within facilities, with a submission to that inquiry advising, “In many pounds, cats and dogs are kept in inhumane conditions in small cages and housed individually with no to minimal enrichment, which is shown to worsen behaviour over time, making them less adoptable.”^{xvii}

The submission called for a “fundamental change” in the management of homeless cats focused on reducing intake, including high-intensity free desexing and the registration and microchipping of cats, and cited overbreeding as a cause of overpopulation.^{xviii}

Combining the above strategies with increased funding for council shelters is key to solving Australia’s cat concern.

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

One in four councils in Australia are enforcing at-home containment measures,^{xix} but because NSW state law has thus far prevented its local councils from enforcing containment,^{xx} most councils that have introduced containment measures are in the ACT and Victoria.

In addition to containment measures, stricter laws surrounding the breeding of companion animals have already been introduced in other states and should be adopted in NSW, which lags behind in several ways.^{xxi} Victoria has banned the sale of animals in pet shops unless they are from a registered shelter, adoption group, or pound; eliminated puppy farms; and implemented public, searchable online registry the Pet Exchange Register.^{xxii}

It’s time for NSW to introduce and enforce cat management measures, including breeding restrictions, mandatory desexing, and at-home containment, at a grass-roots level, too.

7. Any other related matters

PETA is committed to challenging the use of speciesist language, which reinforces harmful perceptions of animals, in turn leading to abuse and exploitation. We urge leaders to revise words like “pest” when referencing homeless animals.

Amending the terms we use to refer to cats as “homeless”, “abandoned”, “stray”, or “unsocialised” would help shift the focus from the maligned cats to humans, with whom the responsibility for the situation truly lies.

D) Conclusion

When approaching any animal control or welfare measures, PETA urges policymakers to bear in mind that the proliferation of homeless and unsocialised animals is the result of human failures.

It is humans who continue to breed, buy, and sell cats and kittens; humans who abandon their animal companions; and humans who fail to desex, contain, and supervise them. To then allow humans to shoot or poison the resulting animals (and any other unlucky enough to become an unintended victim) is inhumane and illogical.

Controlling Australia’s cat population requires a multipronged approach that must rest first and foremost on stemming the flow of new cats via breeding restrictions.

The government must promote adoption and at-home containment and invest in desexing projects and education programmes to inform the public about why there can be no such thing as a “responsible” breeder while homeless cat numbers continue to skyrocket.

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ⁱⁱⁱAustralian National University. Cats kill more than 1.5 billion native animals per year. *ANU Reporter*. 9 July 2019. Accessed 11 November 2024. <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/all-stories/cats-kill-more-than-1-5-billion-native-animals-per-year>

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