

**Submission  
No 123**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS  
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales  
Animal Welfare Committee – NSW Parliament

### **Comments to the Terms of Reference**

This is a personal submission to the Inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW. It has been prepared by Mat Bell who is the Senior Ecologist with MidCoast Council. The submission reflects individual views and has not been prepared to reflect the collective views of the elected representatives of the Council.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute my views to this Inquiry.

Cats are causing substantial, significant, costly, and ongoing environmental, agricultural and community impacts in NSW. They are a major threat to biodiversity and have caused or been implicated in the extinction and decline of many species of native Australian animals. Cats from each of the three different categories, namely feral cats, urban stray cats, and roaming domestic (owned) cats are causing these impacts.

The situation of cat management is failing the biodiversity of the MidCoast region and NSW. Effective change is required.

I have provided comments to specific Inquiry questions below:

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

In my experience and in observations and experiences related to me, feral cats, urban stray cats and roaming owned cats all have significant negative impacts on native threatened animals in this region. We have evidence of cat killing of local threatened species, including the brush-tailed phascogale and the squirrel glider, in urban and natural settings. Cats endanger threatened native animals and this has been researched and verified in work published in articles, journals, inquiries and reports, as well as in the work of universities and other relevant organisations, such as the Invasive Species Council.

It is without dispute that feral cats and urban stray cats are a key threat to native wildlife and endanger many threatened species. Owned cats also substantially impact the community, biodiversity and the natural environment; with studies finding that most owners currently let their pet cats roam. Current legislation does not compel a cat owner from containing / confining their pets and there is not a general / inclusive registration and identification requirement. There needs to be measures and funding support for responsible cat ownership, including subsidised desexing.

*(b) The effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers*

A general cat containment policy would be positive and effective in NSW. It would establish a standard for the care and ownership of domestic cats and help reduce the unacceptable rates of killing native wildlife caused by roaming owned cats.

A general cat containment policy would assist deploy cat controls in urban and peri-urban settings, because it would reduce the incidence of owned cats encountered in control programs and it would ensure that the cats controlled in any such programs are feral or stray cats.

In my role, I have applied specific cat exclusions in new developments, such as subdivisions that adjoin National Park reserves or natural areas which contain populations of at-risk threatened species. These focused cat exclusion sites are difficult to regulate and are compromised by the proximity of older, established areas where no cat exclusions exist. General cat containment solves this problem.

Cat containment policies would need to be accompanied by expanding reporting of roaming or feral cats. This is feasible through on-line reporting schemes, such as FeralScan or Council reporting system. Authorities would have a resourcing demand placed on investigating and reacting to observations of free-roaming cats. These resourcing demands could be met by apportioning some funds from the fees derived from mandatory cat registration in NSW. Mandatory cat registration costs should be sufficiently high to part fund cat containment policies, practices and controls.

There are no reasonable barriers to cat containment policies.

*(c) Welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions*

The RSPCA is an authority on this and proves that containment is safe, effective, ethical and responsible. It does not impinge upon cat welfare. On the Keeping Cats Safe at Home web-site, there is contemporary, relevant information. That information is here: <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/keeping-cats-safe/condos-to-catios-2/>. It demonstrates that cats can be safely and humanely contained indoors, indoors with an outdoors enclosure or indoors with an outdoor space surrounded by an escape-proof fence. Free-roaming domestic cats can be transitioned to be contained.

If an owner of a cat is failing to comply with the ethical ownership of a cat under circumstances associated with domestic containment requirements in the future, there are abilities to prosecute and resolve this under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979*.

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

The RSPCA has investigated this within its Keeping Cats Safe at Home program (which was part funded by the NSW Environmental Trust). Social marketing-based education and awareness campaigns are available to significantly improve cat management in NSW.

Community education is not the sole answer to the current problem of cats in NSW. It is widely known how destructive roaming owned cats and stray cats are, however, many cat owners disbelieve or ignore this knowledge and allow their cats to freely roam and some people facilitate stray cats by supplemental care and feeding. Community education is one part of the solution to the impact of cats in NSW, but cannot be relied on to achieve outcomes. Containment policies, mandatory cat identification and registration requirements and processes, governmental subsidies for improved cat ownership and management (such as de-sexing, etc) and expanded lethal controls of cats are all critical actions.

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

A cat containment policy is expected to place some additional costs and responsibilities on Council, through additional monitoring, expanded regulation and compliance activities, and new community engagement and education. Council needs a funding

stream for these costs and responsibilities, because there is no capacity for Council to deliver these activities with existing resources. The funding for these additional responsibilities (officer time, administrative process, control actions) should come from diverting a proportion of the income from a mandatory cat registration scheme. Cat management should be cost neutral to Council and registration fees need to be sufficiently high to provide resources to monitor and enforce containment. De-sexed cats should have substantially reduced annual registration cost.

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

Large scale de-sexing programs have been demonstrated to have major benefits. Because cats move between the categories of feral and urban stray cats regularly, large scale desexing reduces cat populations. They also reduce the number of unwanted litters, and dumped cats. Large scale desexing programs reduce the nuisance caused by cat behaviours, such as roaming, aggression and urine-marking by males. There is published evidence that desexed cats are less likely to get diseases and certain illnesses.

A general subsidised cat desexing program is effective and will have many benefits. It works very well for domestic dogs already in NSW.

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

Cat containment measures are likely to see less demand for Council pound services over time, as less cats will be in the environment and in need of trapping and control and less cats will be surrendered from unwanted cat pregnancies.

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

N/A.

*(i) Options for reducing the feral cat population*

Reducing the feral cat population is critically important to deliver improved environmental outcomes across NSW.

Feral cat control is challenging because existing control methodologies are limited, and they are typically costly to deploy at scale. The Commonwealth and NSW Government is investing in feral cat controls as well as new research, which is positive and beneficial. More work needs to be done, and feral cat controls need to be substantially escalated.

*(j) Any other related matters.*

In summary, I recommend that:

- i. A legal requirement for cat containment is introduced in NSW via a specific statute / policy.
- ii. Mandatory cat registration and identification is introduced to NSW.
- iii. Funding is allocated to Councils from part of the fees collected for mandatory cat registration to assist enforce cat management (monitoring and enforcement of registration and containment, controls, education, etc).
- iv. Subsidized cat desexing programs are offered to cat owners and costs of the annual registration of desexed cats are offered at a reduced rate.
- v. Feral cat and urban stray cat control is substantially increased / expanded in NSW through state-funded programs and research into new cat control technologies.
- vi. Social marketing-based community education and engagement programs are devised and deployed by the NSW Government and local councils.

If you have any need for further information or clarification, please contact

Yours faithfully,

Mat Bell  
**SENIOR ECOLOGIST**