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INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: F.A.W.N.A. (NSW)

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FAWNA NSW INC.
FOR AUSTRALIAN WILDLIFE NEEDING AID

Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales

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We respectfully submit:

TERMS OF REFERENCE

That the Animal Welfare Committee inquire into and report on the management of cat populations in New South Wales, and in particular:

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

Over any one-year period it is conservatively estimated that cats kill 61 million birds and 53 million reptiles in Australia [Invasive Species Council Australia). Even small koala joeys can become victims.

Feral cats are a well-recognised cause of this substantial harm to our wildlife, but as human housing increasingly infringes into bushland and other habitats, the impact of roaming pet cats also becomes more dire.

Studies using faecal analysis and video-tracking collars have estimated that on average each individual roaming pet cat kills one hundred and ten native mammals, birds and reptiles per annum (Invasive Species Council – June 2023).

Although one study has argued that roaming cat kill rates are less impactful in high-density urban landscapes (Grayson et al 2007), closer examination of methodology reveals significant limitations. For example, the focus of the study was limited to a small number of passerine insectivore birds, comparing the impact of roaming by owned and semi-owned pet cats to high-density housing and lack of habitat/green space. It is noteworthy that, beyond insectivore birds, other perhaps less dense urban areas have been found to be able to support high levels of biodiversity, including threatened species (Ives et al. 2016). The impact of roaming cats in such spaces was not a focus in this study.

Roaming cats have been found to travel substantial distances, with one South Australian study revealing that pet cats can roam between 0.06 to 32.6 hectares with an average of 1.94 hectares. Naturally drawn to any surviving areas of bush and green space, predation estimates show that pet cats contribute significantly to declines in local populations of native species, including identified threatened species (Legge et. al 2020).

FAWNA (For Australian Wildlife Needing Aid) is one of many volunteer licensed wildlife rescue and rehabilitation services operating in NSW. FAWNA statistics reveal that over a three-year period there were call-outs to some 416 native animals and birds that were specifically identified as victims from

cat attacks in three local government areas. Of these only 81 survived, a percentage survival rate of less than one fifth.

Of note is that the rescue call-outs to FAWNA were almost entirely from cat owners who were, in the majority, greatly distressed that their beloved pets had caught and harmed wildlife. Given that many more cat attacks would have occurred than were recognised by owners and many more native birds and animals would have been already deceased before human intervention, this figure is a conservative under-estimate.

Beyond the direct physical crushing injuries, cat attack victims succumb to shock and infection from Cat Scratch Disease. In humans Cat Scratch Disease typically includes symptoms of sores, fevers, aches and swollen glands and can progress to inflammation of heart tissue, cysts in the organs and loss of vision. The impact on our native species has attracted less research and is therefore largely unknown.

Another potential impact on wildlife that is not well researched is cat roundworm (*Toxocara cati*). This parasite shreds its eggs in cat faeces and is known to be able to cross species barriers with humans. The impact on wildlife species is again largely not known.

Cats are essential hosts for the parasite Toxoplasmosis *(T Gondii)* which is known to cross species boundaries, with the capability of infecting any warm-blooded animal that comes into contact with infected cat faeces. In humans, toxoplasmosis cysts can cause birth defects, brain damage (encephalitis), damage to lungs, muscle tissue, and to eyes, including retinal scars. Toxoplasmosis Oocysts are known to be able to survive in the environment for a year. All Australian native animals, including birds, that encounter infected faeces are susceptible and Australian marsupials particularly vulnerable.

One study, that focused on the possible impact of humans feeding semi-owned or stray cats estimated that the prevalence of toxoplasmosis hospitalizes more than 8,500 Australians per year (Legge et.al, 2020) with a possible death rate of 550. This same study estimated that two hundred and forty babies are born each year in Australia infected with Toxoplasmosis with more than twenty percent of these babies having symptoms of impaired sight, hearing and intellectual ability,

The full impact on wildlife is not well researched and therefore largely unknown.

Even when not successfully hunting, the presence of cats impacts wildlife in negative ways. The presence of predators and 'near misses' changes wild animals' and birds' foraging, ranging and feeding behaviours, adding extra duress to the stress of meeting the challenges of staying alive and reproducing.

(b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers:

Devices that supposedly allow wildlife 'safe' roaming, such as cat collar bells, demonstrate limited success. All cats, including well-fed and socialised cats, display predatory and hunting behaviours. Although organisations such as Australian Pet Welfare Foundation argue that there is no evidence that cat restrictions in urban areas limit impact of cat attacks on wildlife, clearly if cats are contained and not able to roam, they are not able to hunt and prey on wildlife.

The weak link in a cat containment program is getting enough cat-owners to comply. Some well-enough resourced and responsible cat owners already enact cat containment, including outdoor enclosures, while others keeping their cats well-locked up within their home or have taught their cats to accept being leashed.

Clearly more community education is required to heighten awareness of the reasons to keep cats enclosed. Approaches beyond keeping wildlife safe could emphasize safety to the cats themselves with less risk of motor-vehicle strikes, fewer combative episodes with other cats and dogs, and reduced risk of diseases and parasites such as toxoplasmosis and cat roundworm.

There will continue to be cat owners who have limited resources, particularly those in rented accommodation, that may not easily adopt cat containment strategies. Community education programmes that demonstrate how to make an affordable cat containment area with suitable enrichment activities that satisfy predatory play in family homes may be helpful. There may be need to assist low-resourced cat-owners in these circumstances to 'do the right thing'.

Other cat-owners may refuse to comply for oppositional or philosophical reasons. Mandating cat containment legislation may go some way to address this opposition. However, without sufficient resources to deal with non-compliance, such legislation risks becoming an empty threat, increasing neighbourhood frustration and complaints as people believe action should be forthcoming but does not eventuate.

Resources to encourage compliance should include extensive community awareness-raising, a progression of warnings to non-complying cat owners, cat trapping and identification, and communication feedback to owners. A humane pathway for cats to be surrendered and possibly rehomed if owners are unable to properly care could be an additional string to the bow.

(c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions:

There are many and obvious welfare benefits for keeping cats under contained conditions assuming sufficient enrichment activities. An obvious benefit is the minimisation of risks of severe injury and death from motor vehicle strikes or combat with other cats and dogs. Minimising the risk of diseases such as toxoplasmosis and roundworm are others. Taken together, cat containment has positive health in both cats and their human owners. Other research evidence demonstrates that indoor containment promotes the development of stronger emotional bonds and connections between cats and their human owners, again benefiting both (Vitale et.al 2019).

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

Australia has already demonstrated benefits from community education regarding responsible pet ownership with many Australians providing sufficient vaccination, tick protection, desexing and veterinary care for their pet animals. Likewise, the impact of cats on wildlife is recognised by much of the community, particularly night roaming cats.

Community education programs regarding the impact on wildlife of day roaming has been lacking and there is a consequent lack of awareness on the impact on wildlife during the day and how far

loved pets do travel from their home base (Roetman et.al, 2017). There is clearly scope here for more education and awareness-raising.

Community education that emphasizes awareness of, and care towards, Australian wildlife, including within urban areas, is needed and should be Government sponsored. Currently, community education focussing on care for wildlife is charity sponsored and linked to donation seeking, which can trigger an automatic disengagement for some people. Such education should include raising awareness on the impact on wildlife of even one roaming cat.

Education programs that emphasize minimising disease and injury risk with related veterinary costs as part and parcel of caring for beloved pets would likewise be beneficial (the RSPCA 'Safe at Home' educational material is a case in point).

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

Cat containment policies will fail to gain meaningful traction and risk dividing communities without appropriate resourcing. This means specific funding for community education, including the importance of wildlife, information on how to create cat enclosures including disposable and affordable ones, and a system of supportive warnings to bring as much of the community along as possible. Cat registration and micro-chipping should be a requirement with financial support for cat-owners of limited means, including those renting properties.

There is a need for effective funding of Feral Species Officers. These officers would have the power to not only advise cat owners but also to trap and house and if needed, humanely euthanise unowned and feral cats.

Limitations on numbers of cats able to be owned should be considered with special licensing for breeders or cat rescuers.

Cat traps with appropriate educational material could be made available to vetted and responsible members of the public that have repeated invasions of roaming unowned or feral cats into their properties.

Areas adjacent to significant nature reserves and biodiversity rich bushland should be zoned cat and dog free areas, with a grandfather clause that allows existing resident pets to live out their lives but not be replaced. Physical sign posting to reinforce the need to not allow cats to roam should be evident.

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

If there is to be any hope of limiting cat populations then desexing of pre-pubertal cats should be a standard practice unless registered breeding animals owned by registered reputable breeders. This should include targeted low-cost desexing programmes. Including cost-free, for those cat-owners of low socio-economic means.

Low cost or heavily subsidised desexing programmes also has the potential to be seen as positive intervention by communities. Likewise low-cost adoptions of surrendered or captured desexed and suitable cats and kittens could be seen as a positive assuming responsible potential owners. These

programs could be successfully promoted as reducing the number of cats impounded and euthanized.

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

In the short-term, enforcement of cat containment measures may cause an increase in demand on Council pound systems as unable or unwilling cat owners volunteer animals, and frustrated members of the public now see a 'solution' to deal with roaming cats. However, in the longer-term demand on the council system should stabilise or even decrease as the number of unowned, semi-owned and feral cats in the environment decrease.

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

There appear to be several Councils that are now implementing Cat Containment legislation. A quick social media review of Canberra's legislation demonstrates strong community positive support. Community education on the need to protect wildlife as well as protect the cats from injury and disease, in particular, appears to have been well-received.

(i) options for reducing the feral cat population

FAWNA is opposed to the suffering of any animal, cognizant that they are sentient beings. However, the stark choice is between reducing the suffering of our wildlife, including being driven to extinction, or reducing feral cat populations by the most effective and timely means possible.

(j) any other related matters.

The love and care for animals are part of the Australian psyche. However, education and action are required to elevate the importance of Australia's unique wildlife to a more equitable footing with pet animals.

There is no doubting that wildlife in Australia is facing multiple challenges and a rapidly increasing extinction crisis. This inquiry has the potential to act to limit one of the more devastating challenges through limiting roaming cat populations that could make a real and positive difference.

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