

**Submission
No 201**

**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
NSW Legislative Council's Animal Welfare Committee
November 2024

I was very pleased to hear that your Animal Welfare Committee is conducting an inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales. As you are aware, NSW legislation is behind other States and Territories especially in regard to pet cat containment.

Although I am writing as an individual, I was previously employed by a wildlife conservation NGO and have had many years experience working with ecologists and seeing firsthand the impact of both pet and feral cats on native bird, antechinus, lizard and other species. I will not repeat in detail the statistics, behaviours and all the numerous cat issues that you are no doubt aware of, plus you will read in other submissions. The number of research papers on this subject is huge. Rather, I will just refer to these two points from your terms of reference:

- **the impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings**

There are approximately 3.8 million domestic cats in Australia and they are present in 27% of households where each registered owner has on average 1.4 cats. However, the number is probably much higher as only around 50% of domestic cats are registered.

Legge¹ states that 'the *per capita* kill rate of pet cats is 25% that of feral cats. However, pet cats live at much higher densities, so the predation rate of pets per square kilometre in residential areas is 28–52 times larger than predation rates by feral cats in natural environments, and 1.3–2.3 times greater than predation rates per km² by feral cats living in urban areas.' Even if a domestic cat is well fed, it will still kill native animals. This behaviour is instinctive. A night time curfew for domestic cats will prevent predation of most mammals but will not prevent predation of birds and reptiles during the day. Dusk and dawn (crepuscular) are the periods when many species are most active – this should be taken into consideration if imposing curfews. In any case, 24/7 cat containment would be ideal.

¹Legge, S. et al. (2020). *We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife. Wildlife Research* 47: p523-539.

However, I note that your TOR state 'the impact of cats on **threatened** native animals'. I have been unable to find reliable data for NSW, and I would be most interested to know which researchers have such precise data, especially in metropolitan areas where threatened species are rare.

"In Australia, at least 34 mammal species have become extinct since European settlement – a rate of mammal extinctions far greater than anywhere else in the world. Cats have been primary contributors to over 2/3 of these extinctions. Cats have also been primary agents in the extinction of some Australian birds that were restricted to islands, such as the Macquarie Island parakeet and Macquarie Island buff-banded rail." *Threatened Species Recovery Hub, Science for Saving Species Research findings factsheet Project 1.1.2*

As supporting documents, here are two articles I submitted to my local community newsletter:
<https://www.econetworkps.org/protecting-nature/living-with-wildlife/cat-control-in-nsw-how-it-could-work/>
www.econetworkps.org/protecting-nature/managing-ecosystems/killer-cats/

- **the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives**

For decades, various government agencies, NGOs like BirdLife and conservationists have been producing educational materials, articles and media about the devastating effects that cats have on our native wildlife. I'm afraid these have fallen on deaf ears where it matters most.

I used to work for a wildlife conservation NGO – we produced resources such as responsible cat ownership brochures, webpages and tried to get the message out – to no avail. Birdlife Australia, similarly, have many excellent resources on the subject - I'm sure they would have liked better results by now. This is an excellent video from the Threatened Species Recovery Hub – but has it been watched by the people, the cat owners, the decision makers who really need to see it?

www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/the-impact-of-roaming-pet-cats-on-australian-wildlife

Responsible pet ownership initiatives should certainly continue, especially at local Council level - but unless there is stronger state-wide legislation that can be enforced at local level, I do not believe that the situation will improve. For example, I have several neighbours who own 2 cats per household. Their cats wander day and night. I sometimes feel guilty that I have a garden which birds are attracted to – unfortunately it also then attracts cats. When their cat killed a wild lorikeet on my property, I phoned the Council Ranger who told me they couldn't do anything unless it had been a pet lorikeet. Killing a wild bird is not an offence apparently! Any softly softly approach such as community education will never work with such neighbours. They consider it a cat's natural behaviour and they do not care. In fact I have seen them watch on while their cat attacks a bird, and if it's a lizard they will even assist the cat.

Community education is challenging because there is confusion in the community about who is responsible for pet or feral cat control. Multiple government agencies are responsible – National Parks and Wildlife Service, Local Land Services, as well as local councils. It appears to be a diverse and often uncoordinated approach to what is already a very difficult problem especially as cat movements are not restricted. In Port Stephens, council officers deal with domestic cat issues and advise residents to contact Hunter Local Land Services for feral cat sightings even when these are on council property. However, it is not possible to tell if it is domestic or feral unless the cat is wearing a collar.

The Hunter Regional Strategic Pest Animal Management Plan suggests that landholders undertake activities to reduce the risk of feral cats being introduced and breeding on their land, or being released into the environment. Landholders have a general biosecurity duty to control pest animals on their land.

Other points I would like to add are:

1. Have you considered why there should be stricter regulations to stop dogs roaming than cats? Sounds ridiculous! Let's have at least the same rules, or even stricter for cats.
2. Have you considered cat-free suburbs/housing estates in areas where threatened native species exist in adjacent forest or woodland reserves?

Have you heard about the Sherbrooke Lyrebird Group in Victoria?

"In 1988, the Shire of Sherbrooke, with the support of the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, introduced a cat curfew in all areas around the forest. The Shire of Yarra Ranges continues to enforce this curfew and other bylaws that require ratepayers to properly control other pets as well as cats."

<http://sherbrookelyrebirdstudygroup.blogspot.com/p/about-us.html>

Recommendations:

1. Ideally NSW should legislate **24/7 cat containment** across the state as the ACT Government has: "All cats in the ACT born after 1 July 2022 must be contained on your property. A number of suburbs have also been declared cat containment areas for nature conservation reasons. This means all cats in these areas, regardless of age, must be contained. Containment means keeping your cat on your premises 24 hours a day. This can include your house or apartment, an enclosed area in a backyard or courtyard, a cat crate or on a leash."
www.cityservices.act.gov.au/pets-and-wildlife/cats#Containment
2. Please **support councils** financially and with the right training to be able to enforce cat containment. I have been in touch with my council many times, but they are not empowered to act and even if they were, they do not have the staff. Extra funding for councils to prepare animal management plans and some funding to assist with enforcement by rangers would be helpful in getting councils on side.
3. Please amend the NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 in such a way to make it less confusing for the public to know which **jurisdiction cat control** comes under. As well local councils, NSW state government laws – we also have Local Land Services with responsibility to ensure landholders deal with feral animals.

Submitted by E. Meyer, 22 November 2024