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INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Through out North America and Europe, nations have adopted the humane and much more effective and evidence based approach to managing stray and feral cats through trap-neuter-return (TNR).

TNR is cost effective as it stabilises stray cat populations without undue harm caused to the animals and reduces the money spent on continual and failing measures (Catch and kill) to control stray cat populations.

Catch and kill method leads to a well known and documented scenario known as the vacuum effect where removing established stray cat populations leads to new strays moving in or potentially feral cats moving in. It has been determined by many animal study groups that it is preferable to have stabilised stray populations rather than removing the strays only to have truly feral cats moving in which are more difficult to manage. Adoption and relocation (which also adds to the vacuum effect) cannot ever hope to keep up with the reproductive rates of cats and kittens.

TNR has been in place in the United States since the 1990's (The Case for TNR supplementary file attached) and has become a well supported approach for managing stray and feral cats. In the US, TNR involves desexing cats which has leads to several health benefits including less stray kittens, improved physical health and ceasing of disruptive mating behaviour including spraying, fighting and roaming. It also improves the general cat colony behaviour as colonies are more harmonious and quieter.

TNR is grounded in firm science and has been demonstrated in many cities and countries around the world to be effective at managing stray cat populations. It stops the breeding cycle and improves the lives of cats in a way that killing and removing cats can never do. Killing and removing cats does nothing to stop the constant breeding and only leads to unjust and unnecessary suffering of animals and causes immense stress for the community (cat rescue organisations, veterinary industry, animal welfare groups) that are trying to deal with the animals in a humane and respectful way yet are inundated with ever growing cat populations who are diseased, injured or starving.

Trapping and killing methods can also encourage animal cruelty as it can be seen by some members of the community that the authorities sanction the killing of animals and that it is perfectly acceptable. It has also been reported by many jurisdictions in the US that there is never enough money or resources to keep up with the cat populations using the trap and kill method. TNR is value for the money for the tax payer and can help support the animal welfare community to manage and care for established but stabilised cat communities.

TNR can also save the lives of owned domestic cats that may have found themselves lost outside or abandoned.

TNR programs have also been developed and established in Europe where the process targets a specific cat colony in an area for trapping, and then desexing and providing basic veterinary treatment - worming, vaccination and a small incision in the ear for identification purposes with kittens less than 8 weeks old and stray pet cats removed so they can be adopted. This means that cats that are truly adoptable and/or can be socialised (kittens less than 10 weeks old) have the best chance of getting adopted without flooding the animal welfare groups and rescue centres with hundreds of cats which will never be suitable for adoption as pets. This can also reduce the ability for animal welfare groups ability to have adoptable cats re-homed successfully.

In Europe, a similar to the experience to the US has been found, that TNR leads to stabilised stray cat populations that have no more litters which decrease the cat population over time, reduces noice and smells with desexing, reduces stress for the community not seeing sick or distressed or injured animals and kittens, reduces the stress on the animal welfare organisations and increases morale, introduces dedicated and supported caregivers into established TNR programs that monitor and look after cat colonies and has the added benefit of extremely effective rodent control.

Importantly, the experience in Europe is that it greatly reduces costs as the average cost of trapping and killing is much higher than the cost of trapping - neutering and returning to the original colony /location. This in turn was found to create a much more positive community overall response to cats and the adoption of domestic pet cats and kittens who are able to be adopted. It has also been found that the trap and kill method had an effect over the very short term of reducing cat populations and like the US, quickly leads to the "vacuum effect" where new cat populations move in to the area and take over. It has also been observed to lead to an increase in breeding of the new cat colony due to reduced competition. In effect, the TNR method deals with the issue of reproduction cycles which the trap and kill methods have never been able to keep up with.

TNR programs also set up regular cat feeding of colonies which reduces the need for stray cats to engage in predation for feeding.

With decades of practice and evidence from the US and European nations, Australia is well placed to implement these cost effective and simple strategies of TNR programs that the whole community could support leading to increased community morale and decreased sense of hopelessness that is prevalent in many animal welfare groups and organisations as well as the community.

An independent research paper (supplementary attached) from Frontiers in Veterinary Science (2021) has also explored the potential and likely disproportionate blame that cats have received for wildlife predation compared with pet dogs and the potential for domestic and stray cats in urban areas to be blamed for killing birds and wildlife that does not match multiple observational studies across urban cities in Australia. In fact, the paper highlights the lack of evidence for cat and dog impacts on wildlife in urban areas which to date has been used to shape pet legislation and also influence the community (negatively) in how we approach and manage stray and pet cats.

Further more, observational studies found that within urban areas, the prey that cats caught were introduced rodents (mice and rats) and sometimes rabbits. In contrast, dogs were more likely than cats to catch and kill native possums. For both cats and dogs that were observed to catch birds, it was calculated that roughly the same percentage of dogs (36%) and cats (35%) caught birds which was around 2 birds in 6 months. This is one example of the urban data not matching what is reported in rural /less urban areas with truly feral cats who are solely reliant on hunting for food and therefore kill a much higher percentage of birds and native wildlife.

Another comparison observed was that urban cats who preyed were more likely to kill introduced prey such as rodents than pet dogs.

Further studies in NSW determined that only 0.5% of injured threatened species were the result of cat attacks and that only a small minority of cats were prolific hunters suggesting

that current pet legislation is misguided in addressing wildlife predation. The paper does declare that feral cats have played a role in the extinction of native species however also highlighted that feral cats tend to live in remote and undisturbed bushland and habitats where they must hunt for all their food. Stray cats in urban and semi-urban areas live in disturbed human habitats and generally rely on humans intentionally or unintentionally for most or all of their food. In addition, the paper reports that a separate Australian study found that predation rates of pet cats are about 25% that of feral cats yet their population density is much higher suggesting that strategies employed by councils to manage pet and stray cat populations are not supported by evidence. Furthermore the paper highlights that although both cats (pet and stray) and dogs in urban areas can and do hunt other animals, it is in fact habitat loss and urban development that contributes the most to loss of wildlife.

Around the world, TNR has been shown to not only benefit stray and unfortunate lost or abandoned pet cats but also to have a positive impact on the community knowing that their councils and city authorities are spending their tax payer dollars on cost effective methods that humanely deal with the cat populations in urban areas.