

Submission
No 236

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Westie Cat Support Services (WCSS)

Date Received: 22 November 2024

Management of Cat Populations in NSW Inquiry, November 2024

Submission by Westie Cat Support Services – 23/11/24.

Westie Cat Support Services (WCSS) was founded in the Inner West of Sydney NSW in 2012 in response to observing the plight of stray cats (semi-owned and unowned) cats in our neighbourhood. We witnessed a limited pound system where euthanasia rates were high without any end or reduction in sight, the sheer numbers of stray cats needing help and that this help was out of reach for many stray cats. Desexing, it was decided was a worthwhile and useful strategy to decrease the numbers of stray cats if kitten litters could be reduced. In 2013 operations were split between the Inner West and Western Sydney. Since 2014 operations have exclusively been focused on the Western Suburbs of Sydney, specifically, the Cumberland Council area (formerly Holroyd Council) but have also included and in some instances, continue to include, Canterbury-Bankstown Council area, Fairfield Council area, Parramatta Council area and Liverpool Council area. We are a voluntary organisation that uses our own money from our paid employment to fund our work with the occasional donation and fit our cat welfare activities in around our paid employment and other commitments.

WCSS focuses exclusively on helping stray cats, specifically through TNR (trap, neuter, release) and sometimes rescue. It is this population of cats that this submission will discuss. Stray cats consist of semi-owned and un-owned cats. Semi-owned cats are domestic cats who are fed and/or provided with other care by people who don't consider that they 'own' the cat but who make varying degrees of commitment to care for the cat. These cats can vary in sociability, can live alone or in small or large groups known as cat colonies, and may reside at one household or several. They may have been owned at some stage, dumped, abandoned, are lost or were born on or near the site where they reside. Unowned domestic cats are indirectly reliant on humans, with some having casual and/or temporary interactions with humans for food and various other care. They can have an identifiable care giver known as a colony manager a feeder or none. They vary in degree of sociability and may have been previously owned at some stage, have been dumped, abandoned, are lost or were born on the site where they reside. These cats can be alone, or in small or large groups. They reside in shopping area precincts, suburban streets, industrial areas, carparks, and parks.

The distribution, locations, characteristics of, and relationships with humans can make intervention strategies designed to help these cats very challenging. Someone who practices TNR will identify what cats can be trapped for desexing and return – this is cats considered to be wild or unsocialised – and those who should be rescued, and in some cases what cats may require euthanasia due to illness or injury. A social cat is considered not suitable for being in a colony and ideally is rescued and rehomed after all vet work such as desexing, vaccinations, microchipping and registration has been done. The rescuing of cats however is limited due to not having the adequate funds for this, the time for this as TNRing is also going on. Often, there is a decided lack of available foster carers, so many suitable cats do not get rescued at all, which is a sad situation further compounded by the fact that the pounds will not accept these cats, nor will large not for profit rehoming organisations.

There is also the issue of socialisation, and many stray cats require this in order to be adopted. This can be a time consuming endeavour with no guarantee that the cat will ever reach full socialisation and be tame and thus suitable for rehoming. Any cat or kitten trapped or collected is scanned for a microchip. WCSS has reunited several missing and lost cats with their owners. Many of the cats and kittens we help however are not microchipped. So why do we not take every cat we trap or kitten we pick up to a council animal holding facility (pound)? The reasons being:

1. There is no room at the facility.
2. The facility will not accept a stray cat unless the cat is in prohibited areas as per under the Companion Animals Act (1988) Sec 30.
3. The pound staff say that “cats are free to roam” and therefore should be left where they are.
4. Some facilities do not accept trapped cats, especially from members of the public (although they do accept them from certain businesses if they have been engaged to trap and remove cats). This is a prudent measure to avoid cases where people take it upon themselves to trap owned and stray cats for various reasons and have various unverified stories as to why the cat has been trapped.
5. A trapped cat will usually be euthanised at a facility. Trapped cats, even a tame cat can act scared in a trap and facility personnel may not have the skills to distinguish between a scared tame cat and a wild cat.

The aim of TNR is to preserve the life of a stray cat by placing them back in their colony (if not owned) if the colony is a suitable situation, ie. there is a person or persons who feed and monitor the colony. Many TNRers however have to care for colonies that they have TNRed, to monitor the welfare of the cats, identify any sick or injured cats, any dumped cats, any kittens born. If a situation is not viable, for example, the area is unsafe for the cats, for example there may be abuse of the cats occurring by members of the public, or there is no adequate feeding regime then the cats cannot be returned to that location. The issue with this however, is where are the cats meant to go?

We have seen many cats and kittens over the years in precarious and dangerous locations, sick or injured and there is simply nowhere for them to go. While large welfare organisations have intake programs and always limited space, many cats and kittens slip through the cracks. TNR endeavours to help these cats and kittens, because nobody else is.

WCSS recognises the limitations of TNR in terms of the cats being free roaming, at risk of disease, injury from fighting or vehicle incidents, and harm by humans, that sick or injured cats may not receive the veterinary care they require in a timely manner, and that many stray cats are not given parasite prevention treatments. But given the widescale prevalence of stray cats, particularly in Western and South Western Sydney, we believe it presents a workable option at this point.

The issue of stray cats will never go away, there will always be cats not getting desexed, not getting microchipped, getting dumped by their owners or stolen and dumped by another party, and that are for one reason or another lost. TNR has similarities, although in a totally different domain – public health and safety - as a management strategy likened to healthcare measures such as free needle programs and injecting rooms which started to appear in NSW in the 1980s after being illegal and then trialled and have since been legislated in NSW and some other States in Australia, as a response to stopping the transmission of HIV and hepatitis C within the wider community. It was recognised by various governments that intravenous drug users will always exist but that their usage required management.

Unfortunately, there has been no targeted community education or training with regards to cat ownership and management as so we are witnessing unprecedented levels of stray cats in particular suburbs and councils, namely Western and South Western Sydney. High migration in these areas from

countries where a more laissez fair attitude towards cats in can be argued exists, has meant we are witnessing large numbers of stray cats. Religious and ethnic interpretations of cat ownership and non-ownership also contributes to this. This has been compounded by the cost-of-living crisis where people are abandoning or dumping stray and owned cats or are seeking to rehome owned cats. WCSS receives communications, usually phone calls but also emails and messages from members of the public wishing to rehome cats and asking for assistance with stray cats daily.

In terms of stray cats in urban areas and wildlife impacts, WCSS is yet to identify any research of worthwhile significance on this topic as the research that has been carried out so far extrapolates data from peri-urban and non-urban areas to urban areas and does not consider the characteristics of cats in urban areas in enough depth.

WCSS is not interested in mass culling of stray cats, the killing field can be avoided if stray cats are humanely and smartly managed. WCSS recommends:

1. That pound's act as the go to point for TNRRers to manage stray cats. We are in the field, know what is happening on the ground, can identify cats in need, can identify cats that are at risk, and we also receive numerous calls for help from members of the public.
2. That each pound has a cat welfare officer who does community outreach work that includes working with TNRRers to firstly try and keep cats out of the pound system, but which may also include being able to liaise with the welfare officer when stray cats need to be impounded without the hinderance associated with members of the public trying to surrender cats.
3. That viable cat colonies are seen as a workable option to the current stray cat crisis.
4. That research be undertaken on the practice of TNRR in Sydney, specifically Western and South Western Sydney.
5. That pounds maintain more comprehensive records on surrendered cats, trapped cats and their outcomes. This would likely involve a more targeted database management system.
6. That TNRRers who with veterinary input identify a cat that requires euthanasia for humane reasons, that we can have this done cost free. At the moment, WCSS pays for this ourselves and the cost can be upwards of \$150.

7. That Section 31 pertaining to nuisance cats under the Companion Animals Act (1998) be amended to make it a criminal offence for any person to trap a cat on their property who have not notified their council and an authorised officer has not been involved via the nuisance cat protocol of that council.
8. That the above-mentioned Act also be amended to include TNR as a management strategy for stray cats that cannot be processed by a pound. And that this practice be carried out by a recognised TNR practitioner who can be registered via the Office of Local Government or with a council.
9. That TNRers be included under the Act and its Companion Animals Regulation (2018) in the Guidelines for Designated Rehoming Organisations recognising that TNRers rescue profile is different to traditional rehoming organisations, for example, TNRers do not have owned cats surrendered to them. Generally, they rescue from the field and will rehome cats and kittens, and as such should be subject to the same exemptions and reporting obligations that 16(d) rescue groups are.
10. That community education targeting specific councils is undertaken that is relevant and specific to the stray cat profile in the suburbs within those councils.
11. That those councils' residents are subject to a council levy to help fund stray cat management.
12. That no cat or kitten can be advertised on any platform for free.
13. That cat containment policies recognise stray roaming cats and that they are afforded greater protections under animal welfare and cruelty legislation along with owned cats who may escape or roam from their property.
14. That the language, intention and makeup of cat containment policies and legislation does not contribute towards greater numbers of cruelty incidents towards cats.

Based on the experience of WCSS, stray cats face a perilous predicament, not helped by members of the public taking matters into their own hands. We have knowledge of residents who will trap owned cats and stray cats and dump them out of area or kill them. We also witness the non desexing of cats and unwanted litters of kittens, people trying to give kittens and cats away for free including mother cats and their kittens. We witness sick cats, undesexed cats, elderly cats in poor health, and injured cats out on the streets. This is an

intolerable, inhumane and ridiculous situation, that unless it is addressed and the practitioners who support these cats are validated and supported, we will see even higher numbers of stray cats as our population and urban density increases. WCSS welcomes the inquiry, and it is hoped that solid, workable, practical and protective mechanisms can be legislated to help the cats of NSW.