

Submission
No 268

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

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Management of cat populations in New South Wales

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Main Aims in managing cat populations should be:

- Protection of the environment, particularly wildlife
- Protection of cats
- Protection of property, leading to:
- Reduction of associated costs, both financial, resource and emotional

There are **2 related populations of cats** that have to be managed:

- Domestic
- Feral

Protection of the environment, particularly wildlife

Cats are the perfect hunter, being patient, silent and adaptable and are responsible for the deaths of over 1 billion native animals in Australia each year. Our native animals have not evolved with such an efficient predator and many are just the right size for cats to prey on. Of course, many of these cats are feral, but stray domestic cats also account for a multitude of animal deaths, such as birds, reptiles, frogs and mammals, particularly in urban settings, so they must be better controlled. Otherwise, many of these animals may become locally extinct, a poor outcome for us as well. In addition, their faeces can pollute waterways and contribute to increased phosphate levels in soils, when our native plants have evolved in phosphate deficient soils, and then favour exotic plants (weeds).

Protection of cats

The life span of stray and feral cats can be much shorter and painful than a well-kept domestic cat, as it can suffer diseases, injury from other cats and dogs and the hardship of fending for themselves. And then there is the suffering that stray cats endure when they are caught, kept in confinement, not collected by its owner or a new owner, or has no owner and is then euthenised.

Protection of property

Stray cats often trespass on to private property, where they can kill or injure animals, either other domestic animals or wanted native animals. They also leave their 'calling cards' which are a health hazard, can cause distress to and deter other animals, both wild and domestic, and spread diseases.

Reduction of associated costs

Control and reduction of stray and feral cats is a cost, both financially and resource-wise, often borne out by cash-strapped local government and charities, and would be reduced by the adoption of better control. Then there is the emotional cost to those who look after and have to often dispose of perfectly healthy cats.

Domestic Cats

Domestic cat management relies on humans, since they are the owners, the law makers and the managers of the issues created by badly managed cat populations. Solving any issues caused by

humans must start with them. Furthermore, this should be made as easy, as economical and simple as possible, to reduce barriers to better management.

The first line of defence in managing cat populations should be to reduce the number of new cats by reducing breeding. This can be done by using breeding restrictions, both on commercial breeders and retailers, and irresponsible, negligent or unthinking owners. This restriction requires a multi-pronged approach: appropriate and well-enforced laws and assistance in educating the community, particularly owners and easing the application of these laws. These can include registration, micro-chipping and containment of cats, so they cannot stray, and can be returned to their owners when they do escape. As part of this process, the issue of vaccination could also be broached to help owners in looking after the health of their cats.

Assistance, when necessary, including financial and even transportation to vaccination centres, could be given for de-sexing programs, so that owners and those who assist stray cats can easily carry out their obligations. Assistance with outdoor containment designs and how to ensure cats are healthy and happy in an indoor environment are other ways owners could be helped. These measures could include targeting disadvantaged owners. There could also be specific information resources developed for multicultural communities. Existing multicultural engagement channels could be used to reach different communities.

Another strategy could be to promote and financially support targeted capture, desex, adopt programs in 'hot spots' with high unwanted cat populations. Re-homing unwanted cats would also reduce the number of cats being euthanised and the emotional burden on shelter staff.

Reducing the number of cats born will then reduce the costs of managing excessive numbers of stray cats in the future, helping to defray the costs of the assistance programs.

Feral Cats.

This is a more difficult and fraught problem. However, reducing the number of new feral cats, as discussed above, is a good first step in beginning to tackle the feral cat problem, at least in urban areas.

Other than that, unfortunately it is difficult to see an effective and cruelty free method of reducing the large feral cat population. It must be remembered though, that there is as much, if not greater cruelty inflicted upon our native animals by cats. In my view, the more important need is to reduce the impact on our native animals. This is not to say that, if a cruelty-free method of reducing feral cats is available, it should be used in preference to other methods.

As far as methods to employ, all I can contribute is to quote the Invasive Species Council:
“we need increased investment in and tools for feral cat management, continuation of the feral cat coordinator and implementation of a new national cat threat abatement plan, and increased uptake of new control tools such as Felixer grooming traps.”