

**Submission
No 270**

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

Name: Ms Vanessa Cullen

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Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee Inquiry into the Management of Cat Populations

Submitted by: Vanessa Cullen

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Subject: Managing Cat Populations in New South Wales: Compassionate and Sustainable Solutions

Executive Summary

The management of cat populations in New South Wales is a multifaceted issue requiring compassionate, evidence-based, and ecologically responsible approaches specific to individual locations and contexts. There can be no one-size-fits-all solution. Cats, as both owned companions and community (stray and 'feral') animals, can both positively and negatively impact ecosystems and can also be beloved as pets and colony members. This submission addresses key areas outlined in the Inquiry Terms of Reference, advocating for responsible solutions that balance wildlife conservation, all-species animal welfare, and community needs.

Key recommendations include increased research funding, implementing large-scale subsidised desexing and registration programs, simplifying and standardising the current microchip and registration system, providing increased support to community rescues and colony carers, supporting Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs for community cat populations where rescue and rehoming is not possible or at capacity, enhancing public education on responsible pet ownership and the illegality of unregistered breeding and gifting or sale, and considering all-species-compassionate evidence-based containment policies. These recommendations draw on both my personal experiences in rescuing and caring for cats, as a member of an urban rescue and colony carer community and from successful management models in Australia and overseas.

Key Recommendations

1. Increased Research Funding

- To date, much research has been undertaken into the effect of adult cat populations in or near national parks and natural environments. Rand, J (2023) notes that the results of these studies are not translatable to the consideration of the limited impacts of aged or very young cats or indoor cats, nor to the impacts of entirely inner city and urban-owned cats and community cat populations. Because the studies only account for the number of kills by every cat observed to have killed and then multiply that by every cat in Australia (regardless of age, ability, containment and location) the statistics of wildlife killed by cats is grossly overstated. Additionally, where some cats may be responsible for the decline of some native rodent and bird populations in or near some natural environments, urban cats are often valued by humans in deterring introduced and pest animal populations, especially around 'eat streets' in urban areas and in industrial areas. This is certainly true of commercial areas around where I live in Western Sydney where desexed community cat colonies are much loved, and cared for by local residents, and have become a noticeable deterrent to introduced rodent species.

"Cats at Work" program from Tree House Humane Society (as cited in CBS News. 2024, October 22) <https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/chicago-rat-cat/>

“The stable or increasing trends in the abundance of these bird species (predated by cats) in Canberra over the past decade suggests that house cats are not having a major impact on these species” (Barrat, D.G, 1998)

NSW Wildlife Rehabilitation Dashboard 2022-23 Data:

- *Unsuitable environment: 413 incidents*
 - *Collision with motor vehicles: 310 incidents*
 - *Habitat changes: 52 incidents*
 - *Dog attacks: 98 incidents*
 - *Cat attacks: 37 incidents*
- Violent eradication of stray or unowned cats may have devastatingly detrimental inadvertent effects, such as pest rodents reaching plague proportions and significant psychological trauma to the people who may semi-own, care for or otherwise enjoy the company of these cats. Having to euthanise healthy animals also puts a huge burden of trauma and distress onto the shoulders of vets (a profession with an already incredibly high depression and suicide rate). Therefore, further research is required to better inform decisions about the management of the roles and impacts of cats in and upon different ecosystems and humans and our environments.

“In Australia, most cat-related extinctions and population declines have happened, or are happening, far from human residential areas.” (Legge, et al., 2020)

- NSW Example of the detrimental animal welfare and human impact effects of violent cat eradication: ***The Impact of Lethal, Enforcement-Centred Cat Management on Human Wellbeing: Exploring Lived Experiences of Cat Carers Affected by Cat Culling at the Port of Newcastle***

“Results demonstrated strong relationships between the caregivers and cats, and negative impacts on caregiver psychological health and quality of life associated with lethal management. It is recommended that a care-centred approach to cat management be prioritised in future, whereby authorities aid neutering and, if possible, adoption, to improve cat welfare, minimise cat nuisance complaints, and reduce psychological hazards to caregivers”. (Scotney, et al., 2023, p. 271)

“‘Lily is hanging in there, she had been shot in the head.’

‘We had other cats with open wounds and grazes and all the cats were scared.’

‘We were unable to get close enough to catch them.’

Ms Wood said members of the group returned to the site on Saturday morning.

‘To discover another three injured cats, two with a broken leg and one, our little

Rosey-girl, had been shot in the eye,' she said.

'Can you imagine what it was like for us, the feeders, to walk out and see our cats like this?'

'The pools of blood, the blood trails and, of course, the injuries and the missing cats.'

The Stray Cats Project said it had spent several years catching, desexing, and microchipping the itinerant animals.

At one point, the population among the rocks peaked at more than 100, but the group said that number had dropped to about 40." (Wakatama, et al., 2020)

- The NSW Government needs to invest in ongoing research to evaluate the ecological impacts of cats and the effectiveness of management policies as all decisions must be rigorously evidence-based, responsible and accountable to local constituents.

2. Large-Scale Subsidised Desexing and Registration Programs

- The recent NSW Pound Inquiry should be heeded and has recommended: providing grants to councils and rescue organisations to fund large-scale, targeted desexing programs across the state, including community cat desexing in areas with large homeless cat populations, especially disadvantaged communities. These kinds of programs are a long-term, compassionate solution that reduces stray cat populations without demonising cats.

"Targeted low-cost desexing programs for owned cats have significant potential to reduce cat overpopulation and also generally receive strong community support".
(RSPCA, 2018)

Large-scale desexing programs have been highly effective in curbing cat populations. For example:

ACT Program Results

The ACT's government-funded desexing program achieved a 30% reduction in stray cat intake at local shelters within two years.

Scaling similar programs across NSW, particularly in regional and low-income areas, would significantly reduce unwanted litter and alleviate pressure on shelters.

Desexing, containment, and registration initiatives reduce stray cat intakes, leading to lower euthanasia rates.

RSPCA Queensland Findings

A targeted desexing campaign in Logan City led to a 25% reduction in cat euthanasia rates over five years.

Implementing similar programs in NSW would improve outcomes for both cats and shelters.

Banyule City Council in Victoria

Banyule City Council in Victoria implemented a no-barrier, community-based cat desexing program offering free desexing, microchipping, and transport. Over eight years, this approach significantly reduced cat intake, euthanasia, and complaints while saving costs. The

program emphasised community collaboration, trust-building, and support, demonstrating the effectiveness of welfare-focused cat management strategies.

*'Banyule City Council in Victoria ran a council-funded, no-barriers and targeted community cat desexing program from 2013. Cat desexing, microchipping and registration were free in the first year. There were no limits on the number of cats from each household. Free desexing is still offered. It encouraged semi-owners, who regularly fed stray cats, to take part and make the transition to official cat ownership. The program also targeted disadvantaged suburbs. These areas were identified as hotspots for cat-related complaints and impoundments. Two Banyule animal management officers implemented this program. Over the eight years, large falls in impoundments (66%), euthanasia (82%) and cat-related calls (36%) were recorded across Banyule. In the three target suburbs, an average 4.1 cats a year per 1,000 residents were desexed. Desexing costs totalled A\$77,490. **The council saved an estimated \$440,660.** This was largely due to reduced charges by Banyule's contracted service for accepting cats, and savings for officers' time because of fewer complaints'. (The Conversation, 2024)*

- Partner with animal welfare organisations and veterinary clinics to ensure reach and efficiency.

"Mandatory desexing has the potential to be successful in reducing shelter and pound intake and euthanasia rates where it is well-promoted within the community, supported by veterinary practitioners, targeted at pre-pubertal desexing prior to sale or transfer, supported through targeted low-cost desexing programs and adequately enforced". (RSPCA, 2018, p.16)

The promotion of pre-pubertal desexing as normal practice is key to reducing the number of unwanted kittens born. Engagement with cat owners and the veterinary community is vital to increase acceptance and uptake of pre-pubertal desexing by veterinary practitioners. (RSPCA, 2018, p.17)

Local councils often face resource constraints in enforcing cat-related regulations. A 2022 survey of NSW councils revealed that over 70% lacked dedicated funding for animal management initiatives.

To alleviate these pressures:

- Provide state funding to support desexing drives, microchipping campaigns, and enforcement efforts
- Develop centralised resources and training for council officers.

3. Simplify and Standardise the Microchip and Registration System

I personally, and the cat rescues that I support, have noticed that members of the public struggle to understand and comply with the complexity of the NSW microchipping and registration system. In New South Wales, there are several confusing steps to microchip and register a companion animal, including:

- **Microchipping**

The pet must be microchipped before registration. The person selling or giving away the pet is responsible for microchipping it. Vets and authorized identifiers insert the microchip and enter the number into the NSW Pet Registry.

- **Registration**

The pet must be registered on the NSW Pet Registry within 12 weeks of age or immediately upon transfer of ownership, whichever comes first. It is often unclear whose responsibility it is to ensure the registration is completed fully and accurately and this can be missed by owners.

- **Payment**

The registration fee must be paid to complete the registration. Anecdotally, the fees being charged by various Councils differ, especially for rescue cat adoptions, and there are online 'registration' websites that add confusion as they are not the official government registry.

- **Owner details**

The owner's details must be recorded with the microchip number. These details can be updated by transferring ownership. The step of recording the current owner's details against the microchip is often missed as the vet, seller, or rescue may expect the owner to do this whilst the owner mistakenly assumes that the cat's microchip is registered to their name and contact details.

This system should be simplified by ensuring Councils charge standardised fees, all non-government 'registration' websites are removed and whoever implants the microchip or is selling or giving away the cat is responsible for registering the new owner's details and providing them with the proof/confirmation of this registration in their name. New owners would need to be educated and mandated to expect to receive this registration confirmation.

4. **Provide Increased Support to Community Rescues and Colony Carers**

- The rescues that I support are highly effective at removing stray and unowned cats and kittens from the streets, nature areas and hoarding and mistreatment situations. But the emotional, time and financial burden on these local volunteers is pushing them to breaking point as they step into the void left by inadequate government investment. Many local vets also take on immense extra burden by providing low or pro bono services to rescues, and even serving as rescues themselves. These volunteer community members and professionals provide an invaluable community and all-species animal welfare service but this isn't being acknowledged or supported and is unsustainable, at current rates, without increased government support through funded free desexing, registration, operations grants and vet services investment:

*“Animal shelters and rescues deliver significant services to the community. For example, in NSW during the 2020-21 period over 72,000 companion animals (dogs and cats) were either surrendered or seized. Of these, around two thirds were initially received into animal pounds, and one third to animal welfare/rehoming organisations. Of the two thirds originally received by pounds, 42% were transferred to animal welfare/rehoming organisations. Thus, **animal welfare/rehoming***

organisations provided support to over 60% of the total intake of surrendered or seized animals in NSW in 2020-21” (The Centre for International Economics, 2022)

“Acknowledge the role of the animal welfare and rescue sectors in domestic cat management, education and uptake of responsible cat ownership practices (such as desexing and containment) and ensure these groups are reflected in the actions, including as responsible organisations”. (Invasive Species Council, 2023)

5. Support TDARS/TNR Programs

- Support Trap, Desex, Adopt, Return and Support (TDARS) programs (or Trap, Neuter, Return (TNR) as often known) as a responsible, humane and science-based alternatives to culling to stabilise stray cat populations while minimising predation on native wildlife.

*“To effectively reduce the urban stray cat population, the rate of culling must exceed the breeding rate (Miller 2014). It is estimated that 30 to 50% of the population must be trapped and killed every 6 months for at least 10 years, to control urban stray cats (Miller 2014). For a city of 100,000 residents, this is approximately 4,000 cats culled in the first year, at a cost of approximately \$2.4 million in the first year. **Clearly, this rate of culling is cost prohibitive and logistically challenging for councils.***

Culling such large numbers of cats each year is unlikely to be supported by most residents.

Published reports from North America and Europe clearly demonstrate that desexing and returning urban stray cats to their original location markedly reduces cat-related complaints and euthanasia rates in shelters and pounds (Levy 2014). An adult cat desexing target of about 54% gives effective change. These programs are called trap-neuter and return or TNR.

Under this non-lethal management paradigm, healthy and treatable stray cats are desexed. Kittens and friendly cats are adopted when possible and otherwise are returned to their original location to stabilise the colony.

Cats in managed colonies are no less healthy than pet cats (Dale 2015).

Over time, the natural attrition of cats in the colony leads to a gradual decrease in cat numbers (Miller 2014).

This non-lethal method to reduce urban stray cat numbers is generally well supported by communities - Australian research shows that 82% of people would support a trial in their area (Rand 2015).

*In Australia, recent studies (Tan 2017; Swarbrick 2013) indicate that **desexing and adoption or return of stray cats can be an effective and humane method of reducing urban stray cat populations, cat-related complaints, and pound and shelter intake.** For example, the median colony size decreased from 11.5 to 6.5 cats in just 2 years in 44 colonies (Tan 2017) and by 75% in one large colony over 8 years (Swarbrick 2013).*

Rand et al. (2018, 2019) assert that predation by cats in Australian cities is overstated as a threat to wildlife and should not be used as an argument against trap–neuter–return (TNR) programs.

“Ten factors are identified which contribute to successful TNR programs, including high levels of desexing in a targeted area, removal of kittens and socialised adults for adoption, monitoring and rapid desexing of immigrant cats, strong community engagement, and support and ongoing data collection and evaluation. Concern over the use of TNR could be mitigated by specifying conditions on its use, ensuring adoption of cats is an integral part of the program (this approach is termed TDARS or trap, desex, adopt or return and support) and assessing the effect on wildlife predation.

A research study should be conducted to evaluate whether, and under what specific circumstances, a program of trap, desex, adopt or return and support (TDARS) is an appropriate tool for urban cat management under Australian conditions”. (RSPCA, 2018, p.13)

Non-lethal methods such as TNR are more sustainable than culling, which often leads to population rebounds. Studies indicate that TNR programs can stabilise feral populations and reduce predation rates.

- The NSW Government needs to prioritise animal welfare by providing resources and legal protection for colony carers who play a critical role in managing TDARS/TNR colony populations.

6. Targeted Public Education and Enforcement Programs

- Implement broad, inclusive, community co-designed education and enforcement campaigns focused on the benefits of desexing, registration, properly fitted and cat-safe collar-worn predation deterrents, containment, and responsible ownership.
- Collaborate with community leaders and educators to reach and co-design with diverse audiences effectively.

“Most Australians support tighter regulation of pet cats, including desexing, microchipping and curfew” (Roetman et al., 2017)

*“A combination of consistent public messages from government and animal welfare organisations, education programs in schools and social marketing campaigns can result in positive progress for cat management. **Legislation alone is not an effective instrument for addressing cat population, nuisance and predatory issues.** The use of best-practice principles of behaviour change and persuasive communication to improve the design of education programs should be encouraged”. (RSPCA, 2018, p.18)*

Community education programs such as the RSPCA’s “Safe and Happy Cats” campaign have increased public understanding of containment and desexing. However, gaps remain in reaching culturally and linguistically diverse communities and remote areas.

Case Study: Melbourne Council Partnerships

Partnerships between local councils and animal welfare organisations in Melbourne have successfully delivered multilingual education campaigns, increasing compliance with containment and registration laws.

Expanding such initiatives in NSW could further enhance community understanding and participation.

7. Compassionate Evidence-Based Cat Containment and Exclusion Policies and Practices

The management of stray and feral cats (and other introduced predators) in Australia focuses on a mixture of toxic baiting, trapping and shooting, with these mechanisms resulting in variable success. In addition, these mechanisms come with very significant inadvertent impacts risk with roaming or escaped pets exposed to control operations for feral animals and/or suffering deliberate, illegal persecution.

“All existing control methods for feral cats cause some pain, suffering or distress: more humane methods need to be developed and adopted as a matter of urgency”.
(RSPCA, 2018)

“The community is increasingly opposed to lethal cat control programs, particularly in urban areas.” (RSPCA, 2018)

- Eradicate 1080 and PAPP poisons as management solutions as these are not humane and are known to also kill native animals directly and indirectly:

“The time from ingestion to the onset of symptoms is around 30 minutes and death usually occurs within one or two hours. Before they die, some animals experience anxiety and distress because they are unable to move despite still being conscious”
(RSPCA, 2020).

“Animals poisoned with PAPP are exposed to predation or exposure to environmental extremes during this period” (Coalition Against 1080 Poison).

“The standard you walk past is the standard you accept” is a powerful statement made by Australian Lieutenant-General David Morrison in a speech that condemned aggression against women, but it is also applicable to the lazy thinking behind accepting inhumane poison baiting instead of pushing for and funding innovative, non-lethal management solutions. We eradicated the use of the death penalty for murder by humans, so much less so should we accept the death penalty for cats as obligate carnivores who equally feel pain and distress and value their own lives, but who don’t have the cognitive ability to exercise moral choice nor voices to advocate for themselves.

The Invasive Species Council (2020) says:

“The Invasive Species Council concludes that an ethical approach to the welfare problems of 1080 requires the following:

- *Prioritise the search for effective and more humane replacements for 1080.*

- *Design long-term control programs that minimise the overall extent of killing of introduced animals.*
- *Improve monitoring to ascertain whether 1080 baiting (and other methods) achieve conservation goals and are cost-effective – it is unethical to kill animals if no conservation benefit is achieved and wrong to waste scarce conservation funds.*
- *Strive to better understand (where feasible) the welfare consequences of 1080”.*

Western Australian Biodiversity Science Institute (2020) notes:

“...wildlife managers need to respect and actively take into consideration the variety of views of society in relation to animal welfare (Lunney, 2012 as cited in Webber, 2020). This approach is particularly important for the management of feral cats, as there are members of the community that have a strong emotional connection with cats.”

Goolmeer and van Leeuwen (2023) assert that the use of baiting to manage feral predators is of substantial health and environmental concern including to dingoes, a Culturally Significant Entity, which many communities wish to retain in the landscape.

- Demonising ‘feral’ cats and using shooting as a threat abatement measure leads to the inciting of deliberate cruelty, vigilantism and unlawful killing and therefore these practices must be stopped.
- Fences and sonic repellents have been shown to be effective management devices at Mulligan’s Flat, a 400-ha fenced area surrounded by suburbs in Canberra (Nelson et al., 2006 as cited in Crawford et al., 2018)
- Change the pets in rental laws to become more supportive of rescue cat adoption, ownership and containment.

“An important factor in surrender and abandonment of cats is the limited availability of cat-friendly rental accommodation”. (RSPCA, 2018)

- Offer financial assistance and guidance for cat owners to encourage voluntary transition of cats to contained environments. Studies confirm that indoor-only cats enjoy longer lifespans and reduced risks of trauma and disease. For example:
 - A 2019 study by the University of Sydney found that indoor cats lived an average of 4-5 years longer than free-roaming cats (Legge, et al., 2020)

To support cat welfare, policies should include guidelines for creating enriching, safe indoor environments.

Most cat owners already keep their cats confined, but some face barriers like rental or strata housing restrictions, high costs to modify properties, or lack of information. Mandatory 24-hour cat curfews are problematic as they often target semi-owned or stray cats, which have no owners to enforce confinement. These curfews can backfire, with some people abandoning cats to avoid fines, adding to the stray population. Mandatory curfews sometimes also lead to unchecked cruelty by inciting vigilantes with little to no oversight on trapping practices or what happens to the cats afterwards.

The RSPCA's 2018 report indicated that councils with 24/7 containment laws have not seen reductions in cat impoundments, euthanasia, or cat-related complaints.

Conclusion

The management of cat populations in NSW requires a compassionate, multi-pronged and contextual approach that balances the needs of native wildlife, cats and people. By implementing the recommendations outlined above, NSW can establish itself as a leader in responsible and effective cat management.

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