

Submission
No 283

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

Name: Ms Elizabeth Ellis
Date Received: 22 November 2024

Submission to NSW Legislative Council Animal Welfare Committee: Inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW

This submission primarily addresses the following terms of reference:

- welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions;
- effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers;
- other related matters.

Welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

It is now well established that good animal welfare involves more than physical health and the absence of suffering. In addition, it requires the presence of positive feeling states and the opportunity to engage in natural behaviours. In other words, good animal welfare equals a good life.

Like all animals, cats vary in their temperaments and personalities. Some are happy to spend their days lounging around while others are extremely active. In the latter case, optimal conditions are required to meet their welfare needs if they are *constantly* confined. These include human companionship for a significant period of each day, a wide variety of enrichment activities and access to at least a small area of contained outside space. Not all those responsible for cats have the personal or financial resources to provide these conditions.

For decades, various industries have rationalised the containment of farmed animals on the basis that it's for their welfare, the latter being defined largely in terms of physical health and absence of disease. In recent years, the science of animal welfare and more informed public opinion are forcing a rethink. It is ironic, then, that we are moving in the opposite direction for cats, narrowing our understanding of their welfare and shrinking the opportunities to express agency in their lives. While it is true that a cat confined to an apartment or house has greater freedom than, for example, intensively farmed pigs and chickens, many contained cats are left on their own for most of the day, never feel the sun on their back and have very little opportunity to exercise choice or to engage in natural behaviours. That some fully contained cats experience good welfare does not alter the fact that a great many do not.

The above comments apply to cats contained 24/7 with no or very minimal outdoor access. Containment of cats at night and for part of the day, or constantly confined but with access to a suitable outdoor enclosure, can be managed in a way that *is* consistent with their welfare.

Effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

There are many barriers to effective confinement of cats that are rarely discussed. Cats are excellent escape artists so windows and doors must be kept constantly closed (with human health and environmental impacts) unless pet resistant screens or similar are installed (with the high attendant cost). Even then, cats (determined to express their preferences) sometimes manage to escape and, being unfamiliar with the outside terrain, are particularly at risk of misadventure. Fully contained cats also require enormous quantities of kitty litter, most of which probably ends up in landfill, with significant environmental implications. Where financial constraints preclude purchase of sufficient quantities, cats are forced to keep using old litter despite their fastidious nature.

Policies that promote cat containment are also ineffective without a coordinated and systemic approach. For a limited period, the council in my local government area (Blue Mountains) is providing a \$400 subsidy for an approved outdoor cat enclosure but was unable to advise of local installers. Despite requests to multiple businesses, including a number that advertise installation for this area, none even bothered to reply, let alone come out and quote for the work.

Other related matters: failure of successive governments to regulate the breeding and sale of cats

Successive NSW governments have neglected to adequately regulate cat breeding and sale. Cats continue to be freely available to purchase as commodities, online or in pet shops, with the latter still governed by a code of practice published in 2008. It is not mandatory to desex a cat before sale or transfer of ownership and there is no cap on the number that can be bred. As revised in 2021, the breeding code of practice limits female cats to three litters in any two year period but provides an exemption in the case of written approval by a vet. There is no readily available public data about enforcement of the code requirements.

Even when minor reforms are introduced they are not enforced. In 2018, the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* was amended to prohibit a person from advertising a dog or cat for sale, or to be given away, without inclusion of an identification number. Since the commencement of this requirement in 2019, regular examination of a major online trading site has consistently revealed a significant lack of compliance, with many NSW advertisers including an identification number for which there is no matching record on the NSW Pet Registry. By outsourcing enforcement to private charities, governments disclaim any responsibility for these failures, while refusing to fund inspectorates at an appropriate level. Accordingly, while governments tout these sorts of reforms as evidence of a commitment to animal welfare, in practice they are largely meaningless.

In Summary

There is an urgent need to address current policies that impact the welfare of both cats and wildlife but the issues are complex. To define the solution simply in terms of locking up the cats is to put the proverbial ambulance at the bottom of the cliff instead of a fence at the top. If we are really concerned about the welfare of both wildlife and cats, we need to address the long-term drivers of the problem, including the significant cat overpopulation. Notwithstanding some downward trend, thousands of cats continue to be killed annually in Australia (and anecdotal evidence from shelters suggests the problem may have increased in the current year), with many people taking on cats simply because the alternative is their euthanasia. If we cannot provide cats with a good quality of life without harming wildlife we should not be allowing them to be uncontrollably bred and then asking them to pay the price for our policy failures.

Elizabeth Ellis
22 November 2024