

Submission  
No 293

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

**Organisation:** Eco Network Port Stephens and Mambo Wanda Wetlands  
Reserves, and Landcare Committee

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## **Eco Network – Port Stephens Inc**

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**Friday 22 November 2024**

### **Submission to the Legislative Council inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW**

**by EcoNetwork Port Stephens and  
the Mambo Wanda Wetlands Reserves, and Landcare Committee**

#### **About EcoNetwork Port Stephens**

**EcoNetwork Port Stephens** is an incorporated grassroots community-based environmental and sustainability network comprising [30 community and environment groups and eco-businesses](#) from the Port Stephens LGA, with a focus on environmental protection and sustainable planning. We are non-party political and do not donate to political parties.

#### **Submission**

EcoNetwork supports the Invasive Species Council's call on the Minns Government, as a matter of urgency to update the outdated 1998 Companion Animal Act and allow councils the power to implement 24/7 cat containment.

Cats are having a devastating impact on native species, evidence for which is overwhelming. Yet in NSW the NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 allows cats to roam free and it is difficult to enforce requirements as council officers have no powers to apprehend a cat to determine compliance with requirements of the Act, such as an annual permit for non-desexed cats, microchipping and prohibition of cats in wildlife protection areas.

According to the Threatened Species Recovery Hub, feral cats collectively kill more than three billion animals per year across Australia and have played a leading role in most of Australia's 34 mammal extinctions since 1788 and are a big reason why populations of at least 123 other threatened native species are declining.

Pet cats are a major threat to native wildlife. On average each pet cat that is allowed to roam, even for only part of the day or night, kills 186 reptiles, birds and mammals per year in Australia, including 110 native animals. (Factsheet, 2024)

Cats are valued companion animals. But in NSW approximately 96 million native mammal, birds and reptiles are killed by roaming pet cats every year – with about 110 native animals killed by each roaming, hunting pet cat. Unfortunately, about 70 per cent of cat owners still allow their pets to roam.

According to the NSW Scientific Committee, in New South Wales predation by feral cats has been linked to the disappearance by 1857, of 13 species of mammals and 4 species of birds from the Western Division. Current impacts on native species are most likely in modified, fragmented environments and where alternative prey such as rabbits or house mice fluctuate in abundance.

Further, based on a rank-scoring system that predicts the susceptibility of native vertebrate species to predation from feral cats (Dickman 1996), several Endangered and Vulnerable species in New South Wales are currently threatened. These include the Hastings River Mouse *Pseudomys oralis*, Sandy Inland Mouse *Pseudomys hermannsburgensis*, Pilliga Mouse *Pseudomys pilligaensis*, Bolam's Mouse *Pseudomys bolami*, Forrest's Mouse *Leggadina forresti*, Mountain Pygmy-possum *Burramys parvus*, Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*, Grey Grasswren *Amytornis barbatus*, Striated Grasswren *Amytornis striatus* and the lizard *Aprasia aurita*. Larger species such as Southern Brown Bandicoots *Isodon obesulus* and Brush-tailed Rock Wallabies *Petrogale penicillata* may also be at risk locally or when other prey is scarce. (Committee, 2000)

In the Port Stephens LGA, we are aware that cats roam our forested areas and wetlands. Local birdwatchers have noted the decline of bird populations in the Mambo-Wanda Wetlands. Locals have used infrared cameras to photograph of cats roaming at night in the precinct.

We are concerned that this biodiverse area, surrounded by homes, is threatened by cat populations.

In an article in The Whistler 12 (2018), respected bird watcher Neil Fraser compared records of woodland birds surveyed in the Mambo Wetlands Reserve in 2017 and 2018 with those surveyed between 1999 and 2016. The number of species recorded had declined from 116 to 90 and a comparison of reporting rates suggested that many species had decreased in abundance.

While there could be many reasons for the decline, including the presence of foxes and the decline of arthropods that many birds rely on for food, cats are certainly present as cat footprints in the area indicate. Woodland species in decline include the Musk Lorikeet, White-throated Treecreeper, Scarlet Honeyeater, Rufous Whistler and Grey Shrike-thrush. More recently Mr Fraser documented a decline in the presence of Eastern Yellow Robin, White-browed Scrub-Wren and Varied Sitella.

We note that the Hunter Regional Strategic Pest Animal Management Plan 2024-28 makes the point that cats are a major predation and disease transmission threat to wildlife and are a recognised threat to many threatened species.

“They can colonise a wide range of habitats, eat a wide range of prey, and can survive with limited access to water. Feral cats pose a serious health risk to humans, livestock and native animals as carriers of disease such as toxoplasmosis and sarcosporidiosis...”

The plan identifies activities that land managers can undertake to reduce the risks of feral cats on land under their care.

We support the Invasive Species Council's view that while we can't change the nature of cats, we can change the culture that allows pet cats to roam and kill. We urgently need responsible pet ownership, and this starts with clear rules to ensure pet owners keep cats contained to their property to save our native wildlife.

This will also benefit pet cats. Cats that are kept at home are happy and can live up to 10 years longer than cats that roam which are often injured or killed through fighting, car accidents and disease.

We also agree that this reform should be accompanied by funding for education, compliance and to make desexing and registration easier. We also need clear rules around desexing by 4 months of age to prevent unwanted breeding and requirements for all local governments to develop and implement companion animal management plans.

We support the Invasive Species Council's call on the NSW Government and the Animal Welfare committee to support:

- Amendments to the NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 to enable local governments to enforce anti-roaming laws for pet cats at a local level, bringing NSW into line with almost every other state.
- State government funding of a minimum of \$9 million to fund compliance, education, desexing, identification and registration programs.
- Requirements for all local governments to develop companion animal management plans to protect wildlife, as is required in Victoria.
- Development of a state-wide web resource for responsible pet ownership.
- Making desexing mandatory state-wide by 4 months of age, as is required in WA, Tasmania, ACT and SA.

Finally, we are also concerned that the inquiry's Terms of Reference makes no mention of disease spread. Cats are responsible for the spread toxoplasmosis, which should come under the provision of the Biosecurity Act (2015) NSW. This act mandates that "Every person has a duty to manage biosecurity risks under their control, ensuring they do not spread infectious diseases."

There are 125,000 new toxoplasmosis infections in Australia every year according to Professor Sarah Legge from the ANU. (Legge P. S., 2020). A personal pathology sampling has revealed the presence of toxoplasmosis in the blood of a member of the Mambo Wanda Wetlands Reserves, and Landcare Committee which the member attributes to unrestrained cats wandering into his back yard and defecating among his vegetables.

### **Conclusion**

Cats are the greatest threat to many Australian wildlife species, have been implicated in mammal extinctions and threaten more than 100 Australian wildlife species. NSW is out of sync with other states, in that the NSW Companion Animals Act 1998 , which covers the protection of native birds and animals from domestic cats, allows cats to roam free. It is difficult to enforce requirements as councils have no powers to apprehend a cat to determine if it is compliant. Cat containment would not only be a win for wildlife but for owners as well, as pet cats that are responsibly kept at home can live up to 10 years longer than if they were free roaming.

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