Submission No 298

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Name suppressed

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I am writing in response to the call for submissions into stray cat populations in NSW.

I believe some commonly-proposed actions and legislative enforcements – specifically, mandatory containment of domestic cats and killing of stray cat populations – are inhumane and ineffective, a view supported by evidence-based studies.

The argument that domestic cats should be mandatorily kept indoors because they are the largest cause of native wildlife extinction is false – science shows that it is human built-environment activities and climate change that are the biggest cause of small animal extinction in Australia. (1)

The proposal to mandate domestic cats are kept indoors is indivisible from the other proposed action of killing stray cat populations. Keeping domestic cat populations inside to 'separate' them from stray cat populations, thereby allowing government workers to kill stray cats with impunity, is inhumane. It punishes domestic cats by depriving them of the natural environment, which is a major source of their enrichment and quality of life (as it is for humans but potentially even more the case for cats as they are sensory beings to an even greater degree than people). (2)

The legislated killing of stray cats risks setting up the wider social idea that it is socially acceptable to kill any cat seen outdoors. Government-sanctioned killing could allow a percentage of the population to persuade themselves that use of violence against a species that is commonly free-roaming in suburban and urban environments is socially-acceptable. This could result in an increase in human-human conflict and violence as well. All of these outcomes would be anti-social and backwards steps in social practice.

Short-term killing is not a desirable ethical means of dealing with stray animal populations that are the direct result of destructive and unconsidered human activities and attitudes.

If this law of containment is introduced, in practice it is likely to fail as a method of distinguishing domestic pets from stray cats, as other attempts to do so have demonstrated. Environmental scientists have shown that the more widespread a non-native species is, the less it can be controlled by short-term control mechanisms such as containment and eradication. (3) Containment and killing is likely to fail as a method of reducing the stray cat population long-term. Un-desexed domestic cats will escape from containment and produce new populations of stray cats. Evidence shows that it is more effective and humane to promote de-sexing of all cats and use Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) programs to control existing stray cat populations.

Education of people about the importance of desexing is the only way that sustainable and long-term changes can be made and the cycle of ignorance ended.

Please do not choose knee-jerk, short-term, ineffective and inhumane, and anti-social legislative reform over the more-powerful education. The attitudes and behaviours of private citizens can be changed through government funding of education about the importance of desexing and related support from government policies, not through unachievable mandates and simplistic killing.

References:

(1) Sydney Morning Herald_Why are Australian wildlife extinction rates so high?; World Wildlife Fund_Global wildlife populations fall 69%, Australia records localised extinctions | Global wildlife populations fall 69%, Australia records localised extinctions | WWF Australia

(2) Niel, L., Stellato, A., Tan. ‘Uncontrolled Outdoor Access for Cats: An Assessment of Risk and Benefits’, Animals 10.2 (2020): 258-272.; Feline olfaction and the extraordinary superpower of cat smell | Felidae Conservation Fund; Zhang, L., Bian, S., Liu, Q., Deng, B. ‘Dealing With Stress in Cats: What Is New About the Olfactory Strategy?’ Frontiers in Veterinary Science 9: 928943 (2022).

(3) Garcia-Diaz, P. et. Al. ‘Management Policies for Invasive Alien Species: Addressing the Impacts Rather than the Species’ BioScience 71.2 (2021): 174-185. https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biaa139.