Submission No 299

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Date Received: 22 November 2024

We manage two small colonies of street cats; all the cats in these colonies are desexed, fed nightly and attended to medically if needed. In addition, we help people who manage other colonies to trap and neuter their cats, a process known as Trap, Neuter and Release (TNR). Occasionally we are contacted by individuals who have a cat that has 'strayed' into their yard (or street) that they want to catch and adopt or re-home. In all of these situations, the cats that we see are not 'wild' by any stretch of the imagination. Most are timid, some are friendly and more often than not any 'aggressive' behaviour is the result of them being scared. An adult street cat we recently found a home for has taken over 6 months to adjust to being a house cat – but she is adjusting.

When managing a colony of neutered cats, the objective is to keep it well-fed until natural attrition causes it to 'die out'. One of our colonies that has been continuously managed for over 10 years started out with around 20 cats and is now down to 3. A review of studies carried out by Emeritus Professor Jacquie Rand (UQ, Executive Director & Chief Scientist Australian Pet Welfare Foundation) on the effect of cats on wildlife suggests that domestic cats (ie well-fed cats), and perhaps cats in general, have far less impact on wildlife than habitat loss; in fact, cats may be 'pruning' sick and weak birds out of the population and improving their gene pool. A cat in a well-controlled (ie well-fed and neutered) colony is effectively just a domestic cat without a home. Anyone who owns a cat will tell you their cat spends much of the day (and night) sleeping.

Two things we see, and have experience of, are: kittens being dumped (sometimes with their mother), and adult cats being abandoned. The first of these happens because people don't neuter their cats. In our experience they don't neuter their cats for two main reasons: lack of awareness or lack of finances. Education, subsidies for de-sexing, and discounted or free animal registration would limit the growth of the street cat population. Adult cats get abandoned by owners who think that the cat can be self-sufficient (again, education), or are changing accommodation and can't keep the cat (a legislative matter), or can't afford the cat food, or have adopted/purchased/been given the cat as a kitten but are no longer interested (education), and sometimes they just get lost. A comprehensive education program as well as compulsory (and cheap) registration and microchipping should reduce the abandonment rate and enable truly lost pets to be returned.

Cat containment is an obvious way to stop them from straying, but this is not always feasible. We have five cats which are permanently indoors, and one cat that is permitted outside for a few hours in the morning. As homeowners we can choose to build an enclosure, fix our fences or keep our cats indoors – those who rent don't have this luxury. Data from Local Government Areas that have imposed fulltime containment suggests there is a concomitant increase in euthanasia and surrender rates when 24 hour containment orders are in place. While it's not known, we can assume there is probably also an increase in abandonment because people don't feel they can comply.

Cats tend to hunt when their prey is active, and in Australia this usually means early evening or around dawn. Similarly, many cats stray (or are injured) at night. Data on cats that have been allowed to roam shows that cats move further from their homes at night than during the day. A study conducted with participants in a free de-sexing program found that around half of them kept their cats indoors (or at least on their property) all the time. Around a third of them kept their cats indoors only at night. Rather than imposing an unworkable (and unenforceable) 24-hour curfew, it may be better to educate owners to keep their cats indoors overnight at the very least.

There is an obvious distinction between city-bred street cats and cats living wild in the bush. Bush cats are house cats that, for many of the reasons outlined above, have ended up living in the wild. Some were introduced by the same factors as street cats (abandonment/dumping) and at least education and neutering programs would stem this influx.

Bush cats (along with other introduced species) represent a potentially greater risk to native wildlife than managed street cats. While eradication in these areas is the ideal, we suggest that it is unobtainable without other controls: education, subsidised neutering, and low-cost registration. Eradication is also made more complex by the role that cats may have in controlling rabbits and other introduced fauna. The biological controls introduced by the CSIRO have had an impact on rabbit populations – but they are not completely eliminated. There are few apex predators in the Australian ecosystem and while the sudden and complete removal of one would benefit native prey, it would also benefit non-natives.

Data from the NSW Government Department of Environment and Heritage shows that motor vehicle collision (rather than predation) is a major cause of wildlife rescue - and loss. Similarly, a study in Western Australia found that habitat loss and degradation were more impactful than predation in reducing native bird numbers in suburban Perth. While we need to control and manage the impact of introduced species, we also need to ensure that native species have somewhere to live and can move safely along habitat corridors. Retaining areas of natural bushland and linking them with wildlife overpasses (these have been used successfully on the Gold Coast Highway) could be of more benefit to native animal populations than removal of non-native species.