

Submission
No 286

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

Name: Name suppressed
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Partially
Confidential

Submission to: Inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales.

Dear Inquiry Committee Members,

Thankyou for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

I do so from the perspective of someone who has just adopted 2 kittens from a remote NSW pound that has been screaming out for help for many years, and has been forced to euthanase healthy cats (in fact every cat that has been impounded there over the last 4 years, until a Vic rescue group I support stepped in to assist).

I also approach this submission with decades of experience in direct cat rescue/fostering, and advocating for the proactive and effective evidence based, humane management of cat and dog populations in Australia.

I will be addressing each of the respective Terms of Reference below:

A) The impact of cats on threatened native animals in metropolitan and regional settings.

Whilst its convenient to target cats as a scapegoat for the problems each state faces with wildlife, the truth is that human actions have a much bigger role in creating these issues.

Factors such as deforestation, clearing land for farming and of course urban sprawl (without any broad planning control considerations for preserving

critical habitat and migratory corridors when generating new Planning Schemes) are clearly having a profoundly diminishing impact on natural habitats for native wildlife, while making it easier for introduced species like cats and dogs to thrive. Unlike native animals, cats don't rely on specific ecosystems to survive, which means they can adapt and thrive in these altered environments.

Land clearing is a politically sensitive issue because significant economic interests (animal agriculture, urban development, and mining), but its clearly the main driver of habitat loss. Australia's 25 Threatened Species Strategy does not explicitly address this threat, mentioning habitat loss only twice, and fails to mention land clearing at all, despite Australia having one of the world's worst rates of land clearing.

Its easy to see how cats have become the convenient scapegoat to Australia's troubled environmental conservation management, and allows governments to continue to ignore the threat and impact of widespread, ongoing habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation, and the unmentionable Animal Agriculture – already overlooked in the Threatened Species Strategy.

I speak here from the position of a land developer, fully acknowledging the habitat loss that comes with the necessary vegetation removal required to meet planning controls when creating housing estates, and knowing too well how Govt fails epically in proactively considering the preservation of wildlife habitat/migratory corridors in its drafting of greenfield Planning Schemes. Oddly, I also speak from the position of having been a wildlife advocate for decades and the co-founder of a Victorian kangaroo welfare group.

Instead of obtusely vilifying and targeting cats, we obviously need to focus on addressing the fundamental root causes of native wildlife loss, and focus on initiatives that ensure the preservation of habitats in future land use/development, and importantly to restore as much biodiversity as possible.

Furthermore, wildlife rescue data indicates that cats are not the primary risk to many threatened species. Other key threats beyond habitat loss, include vehicle collisions and dog attacks.

I reference the key findings of the **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

In summary, killing cats to protect wildlife hasn't worked before and it won't work now, it's cruel and doesn't solve the problem.

We should protect at-risk wildlife with well-rounded, scientific/evidence-based and humane strategies.

Efforts should be focused on habitat conservation, mitigation of dog-attack risk and also ensuring that new civil infrastructure design preserves migratory corridors to minimise wildlife loss through vehicle collision (i.e. build dedicated wildlife crossings over road systems that bifurcate existing habitat, and promote widespread implementation of virtual fence programs on collision hotspots, such as Surf Coast Shire Council trialled with great success).



B). The effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers.

Most cat owners already keep their cats confined, but some face barriers like housing restrictions, high costs to modify properties, or lack of information. Mandatory 24-hour cat curfews, however, often target semi-owned or stray cats, which have no owners to enforce confinement.

These curfews are known to backfire, with some people abandoning cats to avoid fines, adding to the stray population. Demonising cats also encourages harmful actions, with mandatory curfews sometimes leading to unchecked cruelty, as there's often little oversight on trapping practices or what happens to the cats afterward.

I draw your attention to some compelling points on this matter below:

- Strict mandated 24/7 cat containment policies have shown to increase impoundments and lead to higher euthanasia rates without actually solving issues like roaming. Cat containment laws didn't reduce complaints about roaming cats or make a noticeable difference.
- For example, the RSPCA's 2018 report shows that councils with containment laws have not seen reductions in cat-related complaints or wandering.
- In my municipality (Yarra Ranges - Victoria), three years after introducing a 24-hour cat curfew, cat-related complaints rose by 143%, impoundments by 68%, and euthanasia by 18%, while the population grew by just 2%. Similarly, in the neighbouring City of Casey (Victoria), 20 years after implementing a cat containment policy, impoundments were up by 296% and complaints had also increased.
- Other councils, like Hobsons Bay here in Victoria, have rejected cat curfews, acknowledging their ineffectiveness at addressing cat population and related issues.

Conversely, community-based cat programs that focus on rehoming, targeted desexing, TNR and community education have proven highly effective at reducing semi/unowned cat populations.

These initiatives also ease the burden on councils, shelters and rescue groups, while supporting the well-being of vets, nurses and volunteers involved.

- A NSW Government-commissioned report supports large-scale desexing programs instead, showing that killing programs are ineffective.
- The recent *NSW Pound Inquiry* has recommended a proactive solution: 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.
- The best solution is helping semi-owners and owners in disadvantaged areas by providing free desexing and microchipping through programs like the **Community Cat Program**.
- Proactive community cat programs have been scientifically proven to reduce “stray” cat populations, decrease nuisance complaints and prevent wildlife predation.
- The Rand myth of domestic cats & urban wildlife provides a helpful summary of common misconceptions and effective solutions such as desexing for managing cats and reducing the number of homeless cats.
- When creating policies for reducing “feral” and community cat populations, it’s essential to consider the **Vacuum Effect**, an ecological principle demonstrating that removing animals from an area only results in new animals filling the space. Without addressing the root causes of population growth, removal efforts are unsustainable and ultimately ineffective.

C) Welfare Outcomes for Cats under the Contained Conditions.

I have addressed this point in section B).

D) The effectiveness of Community Education Programs and Responsible Pet Ownership Initiatives.

Educating communities about responsible pet ownership is absolutely essential to the wider cat population management issues Govt faces.

- Community outreach, media campaigns and school programs teaching appropriate pet care, and critically, the importance of spaying/neutering.
- Supporting local initiatives that help effectively and humanely manage community cat populations through rehoming programs, targeted desexing and fostering.

Future public awareness and education campaigns must also recognise and mitigate the immense damage caused by derogatory portrayal of cats in the media. Through emotive and violent imagery and language, the Australian media overwhelmingly portrays “feral,” and even “stray” cats, as bloodthirsty, calculated killers - and Australia as a land “teeming” with these unlikeable pests. This media-lead vilification obviously has a profoundly detrimental impact on both Govt and the community’s approach to humanely managing/reducing the semi/unowned cat population and must be countered with effective public education.

In summary, public awareness and education campaigns should focus on the sentience and individual worth of cats, in order to foster a compassionate approach towards all cats.

E) Implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies.

I've addressed this point in Section B).

F) The effectiveness and benefits to implementing large-scale cat desexing programs.

Obviously the most effective way to control un-homed cats is to maximise the likelihood that pet owners will desex their cat before s/he reaches breeding age (I speak personally, as someone who adopted a brother/sister pair from an acquaintance who failed to desex their female cat in time).

Clearly community compliance with desexing is contingent on many factors that can be managed well by Govt; in terms of supporting affordable desexing programs and the critical community education piece.

G) The Impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system.

I have addressed this point in section B).

H) The outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian States or Territories.

I have addressed with point in section B), including several references from my own municipality and other Victorian councils.

I) Options for reducing the 'feral' cat population.

In the first instance I strenuously **reject the labelling of any cats as "feral"**. Declaring some populations of cats as "feral" is very dangerous for all cats. Deprecating language such as "feral" or "pest" takes away from the sentience of large populations of cats and their intrinsic value as individual animals. Devaluing animals and their sentience through language often precedes their slaughter, in the same way dehumanising language often precedes genocide .

The use of labels such as "pest" or "feral" has led to the vilification and justification of the indiscriminate killing of domestic/owned cats, as conflation of categories of cats is common. In some states and territories (SA, Queensland and NT), "feral" cats have been listed as a pest species under relevant biosecurity or natural resource management legislation.

In Tasmania, "feral" cats are declared an invasive species under the Cat Management Act 2009 (Tasmanian Government 2009), which allows landholders to undertake control measures . I was absolutely horrified to learn in 2017, that the Threatened Species Commissioner "declared war" on Australia's "feral" cats and vowed to wipe out 2 million "feral" cats – providing \$5 million to community groups to serve as active participants in the killing.

All cats, whether "owned", "semi-owned", or "unowned" (the three categories outlined by the RSPCA), are the same species (*Felis catus*) . All cats, as sentient animals, hold the same intrinsic value and right to a life of freedom, and free from harm. So I find this Govt led targeting of 2 categories of cats (basically inciting carte blanche violence) to be an outrageously heinous, unethical and most certainly NOT in any way meeting community expectations of a modern first world govt.

As such, it is critical that Govt acknowledge sentience and intrinsic right to life of cats regardless of their relationship to humans in its nomenclature, and avoid labels such as 'feral', 'pest' or 'stray' or 'alley-cat'.

I have already referenced a number of effective, evidence based (and frankly bleeding obvious) wholesale strategies for reducing the national population of semi/un-owned cats, but I reiterate them below.

Proactive measures: Implement new initiatives (and appropriately resource/support established ones) aimed at maximising cat desexing prior to breeding age.

Community compliance around desexing is contingent on many factors that can be managed well by Govt; in terms of introducing (and supporting existing) affordable desexing programs and the critical community education piece.

Effective measures to reduce existing populations: Support existing community-based programs that are already demonstrating that they are effectively managing semi/un-owned cat populations via TNR.

Govt should also encourage and resource the wider community to build their own local programs.

Actively support and resource community-based cat rescue and rehoming organisations - who are currently receiving absolutely NO govt assistance. These organisations are doing the heavy lifting in the semi/unowned cat rehoming space, and are working on a shoe-string self-funded/charity budget.

With Govt support and resourcing, they could re-home a significantly greater proportion of semi/unowned cats.

In conclusion, I believe that the current treatment of “feral” and domestic cats lacks any moral consideration of the suffering incurred by these sentient beings when they are shot, poisoned, trapped and otherwise killed.

Like the overwhelming majority of Australians, I consider this issue to be the result of human activities and choices, and I expect Australian’s to be accountable, and not conveniently shift blame by vilifying the animals they introduced to Australia.

I implore this Govt to meet community expectations by focussing attention and resources on humane and effective methods of managing our cat population (regardless of their relationship to humans: i.e. owned, semi/unowned etc), in a manner that treats them with respect, dignity, compassion, and kindness.