Submission No 306

INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF CAT POPULATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Name suppressed

Date Received: 22 November 2024

Re: Inquiry into Cat population management

To whom it may concern,

As someone who has been studying and working in the environmental and animal industries for over 10 years, I would like to address the inquiry into the management of cat populations in New South Wales.

In this submission, I will address each of the Terms of Reference provided on the Parliament of New South Wales website.

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

I acknowledge that cats, in general, have a significant impact on populations of native reptiles, birds, frogs, mammals, and marsupials. This impact is particularly pronounced in regional areas, where pet cats are more likely to become feral than their metropolitan counterparts and community-cared cats. In regional communities, it is common for cats to be regarded as "working animals" for controlling mice. Unfortunately, these cats are frequently not desexed, resulting in a continuous cycle of reproduction and contributing to the growing feral cat population.

In metropolitan areas, hopefully many cats are owned or that were previously owned by people are desexed (discussed further in section d). However, as human density increases, populations of native animals often decline. The presence of other invasive species, such as black rats, rock doves, and Indian mynas, further complicates the situation. These invasive species not only compete directly with native animals for resources but may also become prey for cats. As a result, native animals that adapt and thrive in urban areas face multiple, compounding threats—including traffic, poisons, dogs, human activity, invasive species, and predation by cats—further complicating conservation efforts.

b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

There are many highly effective and safe ways to contain cats in backyards, such as using tall, smooth, or floppy fences, adding wheels or spikes to the top of fences, or installing cat nets and other enclosures. However, the main barriers to effective cat containment lie in the education and financial resources available to pet owners, as well as the practical challenges of installing such measures at their residence. While some cats may occasionally escape, as is the case with other pets like dogs, the key is to provide support for owners in recovering their pets, rather than persecuting them or their animals for these occasions.

c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

The welfare of pet cats kept indoors or within contained environments such as fences, nets, or enclosures is generally improved, leading to increased life expectancy and quality of life.

Research supports that indoor cats are better protected from:

- **Traffic:** A 10-year review by Olsen and Allen (2001) found that trauma, likely caused by motor vehicle accidents, accounted for over 87% of unexpected deaths in cats.

- **Disease and Infection:** Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV), which spreads through bite wounds, and subsequent bacterial infections are significantly less common in indoor cats (Cornell Feline Health Center, 2024; VCA Animal Hospitals, 2024).
- **Parasites:** Indoor cats have reduced exposure to fleas, ticks, and other parasites that inhabit outdoor areas like shrubs (Everhart Veterinary Medicine, 2024).
- **Extreme Weather:** Heatwaves can cause heatstroke and dehydration in outdoor cats, risks that are minimized for indoor pets (Southern Cross Veterinary Clinic, 2024).

Popular online influencers, such as Cole and Marmalade (Instagram, 2024), often emphasize these benefits, further advocating for an indoor lifestyle for cats.

While some argue that outdoor access provides cats with more stimulation and exercise, research by Jongman (2007) shows that cats can adapt well to an indoor lifestyle if given sufficient space. Jongman also suggests applying the *Five Freedoms*—commonly used to assess the welfare of farm animals—to indoor cats:

1. **Provision of food and water**, including a balanced diet.
2. **Provision of a suitable environment**, encompassing space, shelter, temperature, light, noise, and cleanliness.
3. **Provision of health care**, such as vaccinations, neutering, parasite control, and veterinary care when needed.
4. **Provision of opportunities to express most natural behaviors**, though some, like prey behavior or territorial marking, may need to be restricted.
5. **Provision of protection from conditions likely to lead to fear and distress.**

By adhering to these principles and ensuring proper care, the welfare of cats in contained conditions can rival—and often surpass—that of outdoor cats.

d) the effectiveness of community education programs and responsible pet ownership initiatives

Education is crucial in guiding pet owners' decisions about allowing their cats outdoors. People must understand that adopting or purchasing a cat comes with responsibilities beyond feeding and cleaning—it also includes protecting the cat from harm and preventing it from harming others. Pet owners also need to be informed that owning a pet is a lifelong commitment.

Many pet owners are unaware of the resources available for safely containing and housing their cats. While products like cat nets and enclosures are becoming more common, they are rarely advertised as essential tools. At a minimum, shelters and pet shops should provide information about these products and where to purchase them at the time of adoption or sale.

Abandoning pets in the wild is irresponsible, yet concerns about euthanasia at council pounds or shelters often lead people to avoid surrendering their pets. While abandonment may not be their preferred choice, many feel they have no other option if they cannot find accommodation that allows pets.

To address this, councils and communities could collaborate to help pet owners secure suitable housing. This might include providing temporary accommodation for both people and their pets, assisting owners in finding foster carers, and encouraging real estate agencies to clearly list pet-

friendly rental properties. Additionally, councils and shelters should work to build trust by ensuring that surrendered pets are given the best possible chance at rehoming.

Finally, affordability is a significant barrier to responsible pet ownership. Even when people are educated about the importance of desexing and containment, the costs may prevent them from taking action. Councils could partner with charities and shelters to raise awareness about affordable desexing programs and provide resources to connect pet owners with these services. Similarly, community initiatives could help reduce the costs of containment by encouraging pet owners to collaborate on building or installing enclosures.

e) implications for local councils in implementing and enforcing cat containment policies

I believe desexing pet cats should be made mandatory, with exceptions only for individuals who obtain a permit. This permit should require proof that the person understands the responsibilities involved and will not abandon the offspring. People who adopt or rescue a pregnant cat should also be exempt from this mandate. In such cases, local councils could provide support to ensure the mother and kittens are desexed as soon as it is safe to do so.

By implementing these measures, councils can promote responsible pet ownership and reduce the long-term burden of managing stray and feral cat populations.

f) the effectiveness and benefits to implementing large scale cat desexing programs

In contrast to lethal cat control, Trap-Neuter-Return/Release (TNR) programs stabilize cat populations by saturating them with desexed individuals, which reduces immigration and new births, leading to long-term population declines. The cats in these TNR populations often referred to as colony cats, should not be considered feral as they interact with human carers on a regular basis.

Several long-term case studies demonstrate the effectiveness of TNR programs:

- Over a 10-year period, a TNR and adoption program led to a 66% reduction in a colony's population (Levy, Gale, & Gale, 2003).
- At the University of New South Wales, a TNR program reduced the on-campus cat population by 78% over nine years (Swarbrick & Rand, 2018).
- An American university saw an 85% reduction in its cat population 28 years after implementing a TNR program (Spehar & Wolf, 2019).

By significantly reducing cat populations over time, TNR programs also lower the ongoing costs of population management. In contrast, relying solely on lethal control results in continued immigration and new birth cycles, perpetuating the issue.

g) the impact of potential cat containment measures on the pound system

Many animal shelters and pounds are already overcrowded, by continuing to fill these shelters the welfare of the cats is decreased and the risk of animals either directly injuring or spreading disease to humans increases. We can put less strain on shelters and pounds by educating and making available the resources for pet owners to better contain their pets, as well as implementing TNR programs for colonies of cats in urban spaces.

h) the outcomes of similar policies on cat containment in other Australian states or territories

The City of Monash in Victoria has implemented the Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP), which restricts the number of cats a property can house to two, unless an additional permit is obtained (City of Monash, 2024). One of the stated aims of the current DAMP is to 'address any overpopulation and high euthanasia rates for dogs and cats' (City of Monash, 2024). However, I could not find statistics or scientific studies supporting the effectiveness of this approach. I believe that such limitations are unlikely to significantly reduce euthanasia rates or the number of homeless cats.

Restricting the number of cats per property impacts not only pet owners but also foster carers. Many foster carers already have pets, and imposing such limits could increase the likelihood of cats being returned to the streets. For non-fostering individuals with multiple cats, as long as the cats are desexed and receive regular veterinary care—such as check-ups every couple of years—the number of cats should not be restricted. This demonstrates that the animals are being responsibly cared for.

Several suburbs in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) also impose limitations on the number of cats permitted per property, requiring a permit for four or more cats (ACT Government, 2024). Additionally, 24-hour containment has been introduced, and infringement notices can be issued if a cat is not desexed or if no permit has been obtained (ACT Government, 2024).

As cat containment in the ACT is still relatively new (introduced in 2021), there are limited statistics or scientific studies available on its effectiveness. However, I believe containment and mandatory desexing are more effective approaches than restricting the number of cats per property. These measures help limit cats' access to native wildlife while also managing the overall cat population.

i) options for reducing the feral cat population

- **Pet Owner Education and Desexing:** Educating pet owners and making resources accessible tackles the root cause of the feral cat population by preventing unwanted litters. Mandatory desexing ensures long-term control by reducing the number of cats that could end up as strays.

- No Limitations on the Number of Cats in Households: While welfare concerns in multi-cat households are valid, rescue organizations typically assess these conditions before placing foster cats with carers. Furthermore, as noted earlier, non-fostered cats that are properly cared for will have vet records to verify their welfare.

- **Support for TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) Programs for Colony Cats:** Encouraging TNR programs offers a humane approach for managing semi-feral or community cats. This strategy not only prevents population growth but also respects the bond between community carers and the cats. Highlighting the challenges faced by shelters adds context and emphasizes the need for proactive solutions like TNR to reduce shelter overcrowding.

- **Humane Euthanasia for Feral Cats in Remote Areas:** Acknowledging that TNR programs are not feasible in certain regional areas provides a realistic and ethical solution. Humane euthanasia ensures that the feral population in these areas is managed in a way that minimizes suffering and environmental impact.

j) any other related matters.

I am concerned about the way the inquiry is being presented to the public, as it appears to place the entirety of the blame for Australia's threatened species on cats. Based on my experience in environmental education with both children and adults, I've found that many communities in Sydney lack awareness of the interconnected threats affecting their local environment. This often leads to a polarized response to cat management plans—either a strong opposition to cats, advocating for their removal, or a desire to protect them unconditionally. By singling out cats in this way, there is a risk of fostering a 'witch hunt' mentality, where balanced discussion is sidelined, and cats are unfairly demonized for all environmental issues. Such an approach could inadvertently encourage cruelty toward cats and possibly other animals.

It is essential to recognise that the threats to native animals extend beyond cats. Other feral species contribute to the decline of native populations through:

1. Direct predation on animals and eggs.
2. Habitat destruction, including trampling, soil compaction, and water contamination.
3. Resource competition, such as for food and nesting sites.

Environmental health is further influenced by broader factors, including human behaviour and other environmental pressures. Effective management strategies must therefore address the multifaceted nature of these threats to ensure meaningful conservation outcomes.

Lastly, I want to emphasise the mental health of pet owners and those working in shelters, pounds, or caring for stray cat colonies. It is crucial to carefully consider how this management plan will be enforced and what it will entail. The sudden removal or euthanasia of a cared-for cat can have a deeply negative impact on these individuals. Currently a pet cat may escape containment but then return over a week later, will the new management plan allow room for this? or will the pet be collected and euthanasied as soon as it is sighted roaming the streets? The emotional investment—and sometimes even dependence—that people place on animals should not be underestimated. I urge the council to explore all options thoroughly and to maintain open communication with community members throughout this process.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my submission.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss it further.

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