

Submission  
No 447

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

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My submission to the inquiry into the management of cat populations in NSW is motivated by my long experience as a cat owner and lover. It is disappointing and frankly backward that this state does not have adequate regulations in place to manage cat populations and I encourage that this be addressed as soon as possible. Please see my following points in respect to the Terms of Reference of this inquiry:

(a) Native wildlife - As a cat owner I know directly the hunting and killing instincts of cats and their obvious destruction to native animals. A simple and effective solution is that cats are kept indoors or confined in an appropriately secure and weatherproof run between sunset and sunrise given most native animals are active during those times. From observation those native animals active during the day including most birds and reptiles are generally too elusive/challenging to catch, particularly for the naturally lazy demeanour of a well fed and well cared for cat. Additionally, during day light hours cats are less likely to travel far in search of prey and to explore territory. As such, native wildlife tends to learn quickly where cats (and dogs) live and are more inclined to give those areas a wide berth contributing to a lower risk of predation by cats. And to reduce risks further, cats allowed outdoors to roam must require evidence that they are micro-chipped and desexed to minimise aggression and the possibility of breeding with and contributing to the feral cat population. Of course, the situation with feral cats is different and the solution is obviously to reduce the feral population and mandatory desexing of pet cats.

(b) Containment effectiveness - In the previous point I alluded to containment of cats between sunset and sunrise and propose this needs to be mandatory across NSW. A possible exemption may be sought for farm cats for example, but an exemption must require evidence that cats are desexed to minimise the possibility of breeding with and contributing to the feral cat population. 24x7 containment may need to be mandatory in some locations where wildlife is particularly abundant or if the cat lives in close proximity to a major road, for the protection of wildlife, the cat's own safety and to ensure they do not venture onto a busy road and cause an accident.

(c) Containment welfare - The enrichment and health requirements for cats contained indoors and in cat runs can be determined and provided to pet owners by animal welfare/veterinary bodies/councils and made available on acquisition of a cat and during veterinary visits to ensure cat owners are informed of their care obligations. Most cats can live happily without going outdoors and I from experience, I suggest all cats can live happily without going outdoors between sunset and sunrise.

(d) Education - In my view too much commentary is generated by government in regards the negatives of cats without adequately portraying the positives. Cats are wonderful companions, are trainable and relatively low maintenance pets that can often slot well into a busy family's lifestyle without the significant overhead that for example dog ownership involves. This is a reason I have been a long-term cat owner. The issue does not lie with the cats being the problem, it lies with irresponsible and uneducated ownership and aside from making information available to better assist potential cat owners, regulation needs to be in place, particularly micro-chipping and desexing, to minimise what some people may see as discretionary costs. And cats that are not desexed, apart from contributing to the feral cat population and becoming a nuisance in the community, can be unpleasant to live with leading to some owners surrendering their cats without understanding that the unsociable behaviour would not occur if desexed. In summary, education is paramount for people when considering acquiring a cat to make the right decision for themselves and for the cat.

(e) Council enforcement - A big disincentive for registering cats is the cost given that generally speaking the council provides little to no infrastructure, therefore incurs few costs benefiting cat owners. As such I strongly recommend that for cat registration, councils do not charge registration fees or if they do, a nominal amount. This should encourage a higher rate of cat registrations. All cats must be microchipped and desexed and councils must be resourced and funded to work with animal welfare and veterinary bodies to ensure compliance. Councils deal with a significant number of complaints about companion animals, so they already have procedures in place however to have a standardised, funded, clear, practical, regulatory driven model to operate within should be embraced by them given councils are often left to their own devices to manage companion animals which is far from ideal for them, the community and to the cats and other animals that are affected.

(f) Large scale desexing - This is the gold standard and should include micro-chipping, possibly some vaccinations and owner education. The cost of implementing large scale desexing will lead to less costs managing feral cats in the longer run, reduction of contagious diseases, as well as less complaints and issues within the community. Lower income households could receive free or subsidised fees as an incentive or it might just be easier to make desexing free or subsidised for everyone. This would be a great initiative. Exemptions must be justified and compliance monitored by local governments which should not a big overhead as costs can be covered through breeder registration fees.

(g) Containment and the pound system - There should be minimal impact on the pounds depending on how stringent containment is. As suggested, containment of cats between sunset and sunrise will make a big difference to wildlife and nuisance issues. Responsible cat owners already do. For cat owners who have been complacent in this respect, it may take a little while for cats to adjust but once they do, there is no excuse for owners to push back. The key exemption as stated may be farm animals and if desexed and chipped, there should be no issue. In the lesser sized group where it is deemed 24x7 containment is required (see point (b)), there may be some impact but I suggest that the wildlife, safety of the cats and risk to road accidents takes priority over those who choose to be irresponsible cat owners.

(h) Containment policies nationally - To state the bleeding obvious, review and assess due diligence undertaken by other states and territories (even internationally), and benefit from their hard work. If NSW can avoid reinventing the wheel, then do so. Ideally try to agree nationally on consistency, particularly breeding regulation to avoid unethical breeders moving around to exploit the weakest regulations which has a detrimental effect on cat owners, the environment, animal rescues and councils.

(i) Feral cats - This population can be rehabilitated and rehomed however lack of resources and that there are thousands of already friendly house-trained cats, makes this unlikely. At least as things stand now. Over time, if regulation successfully manages pet cats, then rehabilitating feral cats may become a viable solution. Any culling of feral cats must be humane and justified in that they pose a threat to wildlife, health and safety. There will be some areas where native animals are not present such as cities and inner suburbs, where feral cats can actual be beneficial by managing rat and vermin populations, and are sometimes cared for to some extent by communities. In these cases, the issue is nuisance behaviour including fighting, night time vocalisation and spraying. To address this in relevant areas, working with councils and communities, consider trap-neuter-release programs, which have proved successful in some countries and regions. Killing for the sake of killing when there are humane alternatives which can offer holistic benefits should be considered.

(j) Related matters - A final point which hasn't been included in respect to breeders. Having experienced this myself with a rescued Burmese cat, breeders must be obliged to undertake genetic testing of their breeding cats to ensure that they do not breed animals with genetic defects. Apart from the obvious welfare issues to the cats, this can be extremely expensive and heartbreaking for owners. Cats become part of our families and we invest emotionally and financially in them and to discover catastrophic health issues that should have been removed with appropriate testing, is unacceptable. Breeders need to be regulated tightly given they have typically shown very little ethical value to the animals they breed - to avoid overbreeding their cats, to avoid producing cats with genetic issues, to ensure their cats are adopted appropriately with vaccinations, micro-chipping and desexing and the people acquiring those cats can be assured of a healthy animal with a good life expectancy.