

Submission
No 455

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

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Community cat programs that focus on rehoming, targeted desexing, TNR and community education have proven highly effective at reducing stray cat populations. Conversely, killing cats to protect wildlife has not been successful in the past. It is undeniably cruel and does not solve the problem.

The following initiatives also ease the burden on councils, shelters and rescue groups, while supporting the wellbeing 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. Such programs are a long-term, compassionate solution that reduces stray cat populations without demonising cats.
- The most effective and beneficial solution is assisting owners in disadvantaged areas by providing free desexing and microchipping through programs such as 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 which demonstrates 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.

Many cat owners already keep their cats confined, but some face barriers like housing restrictions, substantial costs to modify properties, or simply a 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 can backfire, with some people abandoning cats to avoid fines, adding to the stray population. Demonising cats can also encourage harmful actions, with mandatory curfews sometimes leading to unchecked cruelty, as there is often little oversight of trapping practices or the subsequent fate of the cat.

- Strict mandated 24/7 cat containment have shown to increase impoundments and lead to higher euthanasia rates without actually solving issues like roaming. Cat containment laws did not reduce complaints about roaming cats or make a noticeable difference. For example, the RSPCA's 2018 report shows that councils with containment laws did not result in reductions in cat-related complaints or wandering.
- In the Victorian Yarra Ranges, 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 Victorian City of Casey, 20 years after implementing a cat containment policy, impoundments were up by 296% and complaints had

also increased. Other councils, like Hobsons Bay in Victoria, have rejected cat curfews, acknowledging their ineffectiveness at addressing cat population and related issues.

Educating communities about responsible pet ownership is essential, including:

- Encouraging people about how to keep their cats safely indoors or contained within property boundaries, such as in cat patios, can help keep both cats and wildlife safe.
- Community outreach, media campaigns and school programs teaching pet care, the importance of spaying/neutering and safe indoor environments.
- Supporting local initiatives that help manage community cat populations through rehoming programs, targeted desexing and fostering.

It is convenient to blame cats for the problems we face with the destruction of wildlife, but in fact human actions play a far bigger role in creating such issues. Deforestation, clearing land for farming and urban sprawl are wiping out habitats for native wildlife, while at the same time making it easier for introduced species such as cats to thrive. Unlike native animals, cats do not rely on specific ecosystems to survive and consequently they are able to adapt to these altered environments. Instead of just maligning cats, there needs to be a focus on addressing the root causes, for example projects which work to restore habitats and bring back biodiversity.

Further, wildlife rescue data shows that cats are not the primary risk to many threatened species. Key threats include habitat loss, vehicle collisions and dog attacks: The following data is taken from NSW Wildlife Rehabilitation Dashboard 2022-23:

- o Unsuitable environment: 413 incidents
- o Collision with motor vehicles: 310 incidents
- o Habitat changes: 52 incidents
- o Dog attacks: 98 incidents
- o Cat attacks: 37 incidents

We should protect at-risk wildlife with well-rounded, scientific and humane approaches. Efforts should be focused on habitat conservation and addressing threats such as habitat destruction and vehicle collisions.

Simply, put we must prioritise cat welfare and support humane management practices, including desexing and education.