

Submission  
No 389

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

**Name:** Dr Cynthia Harris  
**Date Received:** 19 November 2024

---

## CAT SUBMISSION

The issue of "how to keep cats" unfortunately often brings out people with extreme views of cats as wildlife killers on a giant scale or simply evil in general (rather reminiscent of witch hunts of old). Such people may urge that cats should not be allowed in their district at all, or that they should be kept within doors at all times. Sadly, this belief in the necessity of not allowing cats to go outside may then degenerate into physical harm and cruelty against any cat seen in public, cruelty that perpetrators believe to be justified. The "issue" of cats is far more nuanced than that, but first and foremost I must emphasize that any measures taken to control the negative effects on native wildlife of outdoor cats must be humane and based on science, commonsense and compassion. Anything less shows humans in a very poor light indeed. We can and must act as civilized beings, recognizing that not only do cats have the same right to life as any other living creature, but that they provide many people with love and companionship. Once we break the issue down for serious analysis, it becomes clear that blanket claims such as "Lock up your pet cat, it's a killing machine", which goes on to claim "Every year your cat kills 110 native animals" (<https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2020/05/15/lock-up-your-pet-cat-its-a-killing-machine.html>) are simplistic and based on varied and sometimes conflicting evidence. No-one would deny that feral cats in wild environments pose threats to small native fauna, and that humane programmes to reduce their numbers are necessary, as are native animal sanctuaries. I stress the word "humane": 1080 poison is probably one of the nastiest inventions of the human race, and one that only barbarians would condone. I understand there is a relatively humane alternative, and would hope that more research would uncover an even more humane choice.

The issue in urban or semi-rural environments is somewhat different, however. And by the way, why focus so heavily on cats, when dogs are also successful hunters (and capable of catching larger prey than cats) – plus let us not forget the deaths caused by the most aggressive creature on the planet, and the only one to cause wholesale destruction of habitat: humans. Compared with humans, cats are far less dangerous.

Not all cats are successful hunters, and many domestic cats, who have no need to seriously practise hunting skill, hunt very little if at all. We have been a multi-cat household for nearly 50 years, living in a suburban and then semi-rural area. Our observation is that most of our cats display some hunting behaviour as juveniles, but less and less as they mature and age. We know where they are: there is someone at home almost all of the time. The cats sleep in their preferred spots (inside or outside) for nearly all of the day and night, and spend a few hours being active. Of the five cats currently in our house, one has never been observed hunting anything, and rarely goes outside. Four others (three in the "mature" phase, one two years old) spend most of their time asleep. We live on a small farm, and our cats nearly always choose to stay within our house yard. Occasionally we will find the remains of a dead mouse. The odd dead bird may well have flown into the electricity wires (broken neck) or been old or unhealthy: cats may be responsible for some of the deaths, but they are not many. We occasionally rescue small lizards. If even one of our cats killed "110 native animals" per year, I guarantee our garden would be littered with fur and feathers (I am a keen gardener and very observant). These cats are not "killing machines" decimating our local wildlife on a daily basis!

It seems obvious from an ethical point of view that cats – like any other living creature – deserve recognition of their right to life, and that for their protection and welfare we should make efforts to reduce the numbers of semi-wild cats living in proximity to humans. Killing them is not an acceptable strategy. Catch, desex, release is practised in some places, and humanely reduces homeless populations. Some charitable groups (there is one in our nearest town) humanely trap the homeless cats in local colonies, have them desexed, and either re-home the suitable ones or provide for their lifetime home in a special safe area. This should be encouraged, and funds allocated for such programmes, especially among disadvantaged groups. Funds should also be allocated for public education. A report commissioned by the NSW Government also supports the idea of large-scale desexing as being not only humane but also effective in the long term. As far as cat containment is concerned, this suits some families and some cats, but it is not a feasible or kind solution for all. People in rental properties, in flats /apartments, or in very small homes may find it impossible to fully "contain" their cats inside the home, or even to construct a cat run attached to their house. In many cases it would not be in the best interests of cats to be virtually imprisoned inside a very small area, even if enrichment were provided. Indoor cats (and dogs, for that matter) may also inadvertently "escape" despite the owner's best intentions, and it is surely both cruel and unjust to impose draconian penalties in these circumstances. Strict mandatory 24-hour cat containment curfews do not seem to lessen complaints of "wandering" cats. Even as impounding increases, so apparently do the complaints, not to mention unauthorized and unregulated trapping.

It is time for Australia to leave the Dark Ages behind, with its almost pathological hatred for cats. If we really want to address the problem of native wildlife being killed by roaming cats, we need to adopt a much broader, science-based and above all ethical and humane set of actions. These should prioritize: providing more habitat for our wildlife and ceasing to destroy it; providing more wildlife sanctuaries; researching and taking action to lessen wildlife death on our roads; putting genuine effort into desexing programmes for all cats, owned or not, at reasonable cost or in some cases for free; and encouraging cat owners to take whatever steps are reasonable (depending on their circumstances) to give their cats a life consistent with welfare and wellbeing while minimizing impact on wildlife.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Cynthia Harris