

Submission
No 483

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

Name: Ms Lucia Smith
Date Received: 22 November 2024

Dear Inquiry Committee- please read my submission that addresses the following terms of reference.

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

Cats in NSW are being unfairly demonised and targeted by cruel methods like baiting, trapping, and mandatory containment—practices that are not only ineffective but lead to unnecessary suffering. The Invasive Species Council is pushing for lethal controls despite a lack of evidence that these measures work.

The use of labels such as “pest” or “feral” is used to vilify and justify the killing of cats. All cats have the same right to life, and protection from harm, regardless of their relationship to humans. All cats, whether “owned”, “semi-owned”, or “unowned” (the three categories outlined by the RSPCA), are the same species (*Felis catus*). All cats, are sentient animals, hold the same intrinsic value and right to a life of freedom, and should live free from harm. We must acknowledge sentience and intrinsic right to life of cats.

There is a lack of solid evidence of the direct impact of cats on all Australian wildlife.

Wildlife rescue data shows that cats aren't the primary risk to many threatened species. Key threats include habitat loss, vehicle collisions and dog attacks.

While we need to address the impacts of non-native species on Australia's biodiversity, we must not shift the blame by vilifying the non-native species. Australia's Biodiversity Emergency today is driven by exploitation, native forest logging, habitat loss (land-use change), pollution, climate damage and non-native species, and these drivers are all in turn driven by human activities and choices. The treatment of all animals, regardless of their origin, should be humane and this includes cats. Cats that are abandoned or homeless have been put in this situation because of US. Many cats start out as domesticated cats and then are abandoned or left homeless through no fault of their own. It is disgusting to refer to them as feral cats. They are non-domesticated and should not be immediately tagged and vilified as feral but 'free-living' cats trying to survive. They are sentient beings with a right to life. Stray cats are NOT feral cats.

Any decisions must be based on accurate data and not on approximate population estimates. New surveys must be undertaken to acquire the total cat numbers in NSW. There is no solid evidence of the direct impact of cats on all Australian native wildlife, just assumptions.

Native habitat and species conservation in NSW must be **addressed holistically**, with research and policy focusing on the five drivers of **Biodiversity Loss** (climate change; increased natural disasters-bushfires and floods; predation; habitat loss/deforestation through residential development and/or other projects (farming-beef agriculture, mining, oil/gas); and expansive native forest logging by Forestry Corp NSW. These are the causes that contribute to biodiversity loss and impact widespread habitat loss. All these causes are man-made even predation by feral animals that were introduced by man into Australia. Governments have allowed this problem to magnify because they have addressed it in the wrong way.

Baiting is often taken up by native animals that ingest these poisons because they eat other animals directly poisoned. The government sanctioned killing of non-native animals as the ONLY cause i.e. abandoned stray cats that threaten native wildlife is a simplistic approach to take and vilifies stray cats wrongly.

It also deflects away from the government's own responsibility in causing and directly contributing to biodiversity loss in NSW. Government actions or inaction are the root causes of biodiversity loss NOT stray cats. The NSW government is exacerbating climate change by supporting expansive fossil fuel projects that contribute to more climate change and increased natural disasters. The governments' continued and increased native forest logging is destroying our old growth trees that are effective carbon capturers. The government is responsible for worsening climate change and habitat loss through their support of these destructive industries that cause biodiversity loss, NOT STRAY CATS!

b) the effectiveness of cat containment policies including potential barriers

Cat containment policies MUST be humane at all times. This is a man-made problem that must be solved in a well-thought out compassionate way by the government. Knee-jerk reactions that focus on immediate solution involving cruel methods is strongly opposed. Cats in NSW are being unfairly demonised and targeted by cruel methods like baiting, trapping, and mandatory containment—practices that are not only ineffective but lead to unnecessary suffering of cats that feel this pain and cruelty.

Studies on information from Hobson Bay, Hume, Casey and Yarra Ranges councils has been assessed. It recognised that mandated containment contributes to risks for increased cruelty to cats for stray and pet cats. <https://petwelfare.org.au/2022/09/02/key-issues-to-consider-related-to-mandated-24-7-cat-containment/>

Mandated cat containment is not effective. APWF (Australian Pet Welfare Foundation) has findings from a number of Australia councils which show it does not achieve aims and is not cost effective and value for money. <https://petwelfare.org.au/2022/08/31/australian-pet-welfare-foundation-position-statement-on-cat-containment/>

c) welfare outcomes for cats under contained conditions

“There are some circumstances under which a cat’s physical and mental needs will not be successfully met in containment due to a range of factors including the presence of other animals, space available, human factors, and ability to modify the property. There are also some cats who are unable to cope with containment... Mandatory 24/7 containment may increase the potential for negative impacts on animal welfare and the community, compared to voluntary implementation of 24/7 containment on an individual basis, by imposing it on people and cats who are not suited or capable of implementing it appropriately”

<https://kb.rspca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/PP-A8-Cat-Containment-2024.pdf>

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 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’s often little oversight on trapping practices or what happens to the cats afterward.

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

We must prioritise cat welfare and support humane management practices, including desexing and education.

Funding for responsible pet ownership initiatives like subsidised desexing and a streamlined pet identification and cat registration processes is recommended.

Public awareness and education should be sensitive to all opinions of cats and, at the very least, must be tailored to individual community types – inner-city, suburb, regional, rural, and remote. A one size fits all approach is not the answer.

Local councils should be educating communities about responsible pet ownership is essential.

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, and 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 is also recommended.

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

Proactive community cat programs led by Councils have been scientifically proven to reduce stray cat populations, decrease nuisance complaints and prevent wildlife predation.

Strict mandated 24/7 cat containment have shown to increase impoundments and lead to higher euthanasia rates without actually solving issues like roaming cats, however.

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

There is a move toward societal acceptance that the onus is on humans to minimise the impact of cats' predation on wildlife, by minimising the number of cats that exist across all NSW environments. Effective solutions such as desexing for managing cats and reducing the number of homeless cats is an important initiative.

Funding and media focus should be on the research, development and promotion of fertility control (e.g. immune contraceptives) as a viable but understudied method of humane cat population control.

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

The RSPCA's 2018 report shows that councils with containment laws have not seen reductions in cat-related complaints or wandering.

The government should promote adoption and at-home containment with funded cat-runs to improve the welfare of cats and invest in desexing projects and education programmes to inform the public about why there can be no such thing as a "responsible" breeder while homeless cat numbers continue to skyrocket.

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

In 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 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 (Victoria), have rejected cat curfews, acknowledging their ineffectiveness at addressing cat population and related issues. The desexing program is the only effective way to reduce cat populations in NSW.

i) options for reducing the feral cat population

Domestic cats should not be bred or sold commercially without robust regulation. Pet shops and the in-person and online sales of cats should be strongly regulated to ensure that only desexed and microchipped shelter/rescue cats are sold at prices that only cover the cost of the cats' care, so that breeding cats is a non-profitable activity.

Killing cats to protect wildlife hasn't worked before and it won't work now, it's cruel and doesn't solve the problem. I support humane, science-based solutions for cat welfare and wildlife protection in NSW like more research into fertility vaccines.

Create and promote community and media campaigns that encourage creative, kind ways to keep cats as companion animals. Limit cat breeding or completely remove and ban to minimise predation of native animals.

'Population estimates' on the number of feral and stray cats are not helpful at all. Culling cats in the millions I strongly disagree with especially when we do not have accurate numbers and where they are located. New

accurate surveys that are checked by an independent outside source is recommended especially if the data can be interfered with or changed.

j) any other related matters

NSW should embrace the cat terms: feral or domestic, and domestic owned, semi owned or unowned. Stray cats though are NOT feral cats.

There is limited, misrepresented information on the impact of cats on native wildlife and habitat in Australia. No large-scale studies have been conducted on the impact of cats on native wildlife in Australia. There is a lack of solid evidence of the direct impact of cats on all Australian wildlife. The main drivers of biodiversity loss are pollution and habitat loss and fragmentation. Land clearing is a politically sensitive issue because significant economic interests (animal agriculture, urban development, and mining) are the main drivers of habitat loss. Australia's Threatened Species Strategy does not explicitly address these threats, mentioning habitat loss only twice, and failing to mention land clearing at all, despite Australia having one of the world's worst rates of land clearing. Biodiversity loss is clearly a result of governments' and peoples' negative actions that destroy species environments and habitat especially through sustained government sanctioned native forest logging.

Cats are a convenient scapegoat to Australia's troubled environmental conservation management and allows governments to continue to ignore the **real threat and impact** of widespread, ongoing habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation, and the unmentionable animal agriculture especially beef agriculture that has cleared massive tracts of land. This is conveniently overlooked in the Threatened Species Strategy.

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

We should protect at-risk wildlife with well-rounded, scientific and humane approaches. The above data shows that wildlife rehabilitation negative issues were attributed mainly to unsuitable habitat. This would indicate habitat that has been interfered with, resulting in eroded environmental values usually by man's footprint such as logging. Efforts should be focused by the government restoring habitat and habitat conservation and address ongoing threats in NSW like habitat destruction through sustained logging.

NSW native forest logging has to end and where wildlife use corridors like roads to cross, speed signs should indicate a reduction in speed as well as labelling native wildlife present as warnings for motorists to reduce roadkill. These are NSW government failures, and it is their responsibility to address. Let's not blame and vilify cats as causing native wildlife deaths. The above data proves that cats had the lowest score and are not the main cause of species decline.