



Submission:

Draft ACT Cat Plan

JUNE 2019

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. We have been the community's voice for the environment in the Canberra region since 1979.

Our mission is to achieve an ecologically sustainable and zero net carbon society through advocacy, education, research and engagement with community, the private sector and with government.

We represent more than 45 member groups who in turn represent over 15,000 supporters. We harness the collective expertise and experience of our member groups and networks. We work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to achieve the highest quality environment for Canberra and its region.

The Conservation Council campaigns on:

- **Climate Change** – a regional, national and global challenge
- **Biodiversity** – protecting our unique ecological communities in the Bush Capital
- **Water** – smart use of a scarce resource
- **Transport** – connecting people and places
- **Waste** – being efficient through closed-loop systems
- **Planning** – the right things in the right places
- **Governance** – for a smarter, sustainable Canberra

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Introduction

The Conservation Council ACT Region welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft ACT Cat Plan 2019-29. As an advocate for the environment in the ACT region, the negative impact of roaming domestic cats and feral cats on our local wildlife has been of ongoing concern to the Council for many years. Our involvement extends back to ensuring the first cat containment suburbs of Forde and Bonner, next to Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve, were declared in 2004.

Community attitudes towards cat containment have shifted since this time and there is a general acceptance that cat containment delivers benefits for wildlife, and for the wellbeing of people's pets. There is nationwide support for better domestic cat management and Canberra has the opportunity to be a leader in demonstrating how pet-owning communities can coexist with vulnerable wildlife. The Conservation Council has long held the view that cat containment should be applied across the whole of Canberra and that this should occur by a date prescribed in advance. We continue to support implementation of city-wide cat containment by 2025.

More broadly, the Conservation Council supports the strategy to promote responsible cat ownership, which recognises that people care for the health and wellbeing of their cat, as well as taking responsibility for their cat's impact on wildlife and the nuisance it may cause other people.

We strongly support action to undertake feral cat control where it is feasible, cost-effective and can provide a conservation benefit, as well as the action to increase cat-free conservation areas by expanding predator-proof fences in nature reserves where appropriate.

It is a positive step that the ACT Government is now engaging with the Canberra community on the issue of cat management to improve outcomes for everyone, including cats, owners and native wildlife, and we look forward to the finalisation of policy on this issue later in 2019.

STRATEGY 1: Promote responsible cat ownership

Action 1 – Promote responsible pet ownership through community education and engagement

The Conservation Council supports responsible cat ownership, and that cat owners contain cats to their premises. There is a need for community education about the benefits for the health and life span of cats when they are appropriately contained, as while many cat owners have already become more aware, some in the community continue to hold the view that containment may be harmful for cats.

Community education and engagement, both by the government and non-government organisations, could be targeted to cat owners following the introduction of mandatory cat registration. A community education campaign should highlight ownership responsibilities under the *Domestic Animals Act 2000* for compulsory de-sexing and micro-chipping of cats, as well as containment in legislated areas. The campaign should also focus on the issue of feeding stray cats, and encourage people to either adopt and care for the cat or take it to the RSPCA for re-homing.

Action 2 – Raise awareness of cat behaviour through citizen science

Raising community awareness and understanding about cat behaviour will assist cat owners to recognise the impact, or potential impact, their pet cats can have on local wildlife, and also the nuisance they can cause to their neighbours. The cat tracker program, a citizen science project previously run in Adelaide, provided many examples of this and is something that could be considered in Canberra. The local citizen science platform Canberra Nature Map is a popular way of reporting sightings for cats, but at present the platform only accepts feral cats i.e. a cat that has no regular interaction with humans. To date there have only been six sightings submitted.

Action 3 – Improve cat desexing rates

The Conservation Council supports the ACT Government exploring ways to encourage cat owners to de-sex and contain their cats, including improving affordability for people on low incomes. Community education on de-sexing cats should focus on the advantages to cat owners; de-sexed cats are less likely to wander, and therefore less likely to become lost or injured, or be involved in fights. They also generally live longer, healthier lives and are more affectionate companions for humans. Free de-sexing could be offered to people who adopt and care for a stray cat.

STRATEGY 2: Improve compliance and enforcement

Action 4 - Explore improved systems for cat identification and reunification with cat owners, including the introduction of cat registration as part of a pet registration model

The Conservation Council supports the introduction of cat registration in the ACT to improve the management of cat welfare across Canberra. Registration would provide benefits such as enabling identification of lost cats and reunification with owners, as well as giving a more accurate account of the domestic cat population in Canberra. It would also allow government to target community education on responsible cat ownership.

Cat registration would also likely see an increase in the compliance of cat owners undertaking the required de-sexing of their cat to avoid unwanted kittens, and micro-chipping their cat.

Cat registration should be consistent with the practices for dog registration, that is, new requirements that dogs are registered annually at no additional cost to owners. It is important that registration costs should not serve as a disincentive for cat owners to register their pets. Both cat and dog registration policies should take into consideration low-income families, with provisions for payment exemptions and/or reduced registration fees.

Action 5 - Implement a program of compliance and enforcement, in concert with a public education campaign, using a system of warnings and information. Pursue repeat offenders for offences against the Domestic Animals Act 2000

Uniform cat laws across all of Canberra, including cat containment, would provide consistency across the jurisdiction and make it easier to inform all residents about their obligations under the *Domestic Animals Act 2000*.

Compliance of cat management measures, including cat containment, would be easiest to implement if owned cats are registered and if cat containment exists right across the ACT.

Compliance measures would be well supported by specialist training for rangers and suitably outfitted vehicles to improve compliance. Currently there is little investment in compliance, and the policy in declared cat containment suburbs is supported almost entirely on voluntary compliance of residents.

Revenue raised from cat registration could help support dedicated funding for community education and implementation of compliance measures for cat management and other cat-related matters undertaken by Domestic Animal Services.

STRATEGY 5: Expand cat containment

The Conservation Council supports a blanket approach (option C) for expanding cat containment areas in the ACT. The future date of 2025 provides enough time to enable people to take into account the need to contain their cat when they consider purchasing or acquiring a new pet cat. The Conservation Council supports the implementation of 24-hour cat containment to all suburbs of the ACT because it would:

- apply to all residents across the city
- be the most easily understood and equitable for residents
- be simpler to administer
- provide residents the same transition period
- remove the need for specific signage and education campaigns targeted to specific areas
- unify the message to all cat and dog owners about responsible pet ownership
- deliver the greatest environmental benefits for Canberra's vulnerable native woodland and grassland species.

An ACT-wide declaration will have an impact on cat owners in existing suburbs who do not contain their cats. This impact will be minimised by providing a significant lead-time before cat containment requirements are fully enforced. Educational campaigns and information can support cat owners who might wish to transition their cat into cat containment. Given that roaming cats have a shortened lifespan, cat owners may decide not to acquire another cat, or to train a new cat/kitten prior to full enforcement.

Canberra-wide cat containment should be undertaken in conjunction with the phasing-in approach (option A) for any new suburbs that are developed between now and 2025.

The Council does not support a grandfathered approach (option B) which would be difficult to enforce and potentially confusing as there would be locations where cats are both required to be contained, but also some that are allowed to be roaming. While it may marginally improve conservation outcomes, it would not deliver the comprehensive response that is required. Option B may ameliorate the concerns of cat owners about transitioning roaming cats indoors, however the government should investigate with the RSPCA and veterinarians what level of risk is associated with this should a fixed deadline in five years be set, acknowledging that most cats can transition.

If Canberra-wide cat containment is set for 2025, progressive implementation of cat containment areas in new suburbs should continue until that time. Any phasing in of cat containment measures prior to 2025 could also be guided by which suburbs are identified as priority areas for conservation of threatened and significant wildlife species. The Eyles-Mulvaney 2010 report has a map at Figure 4 which shows suburbs shaded as high, moderate and low for declaration as cat containment, which could guide this approach.

There appears to be community acceptance for cat containment. A telephone survey commissioned by the ACT Government in 2011 showed that there is strong support for cat containment, with 65 percent of respondents supporting cat containment in all new suburbs of the ACT and 58 percent supporting cat containment across the whole of the ACT. Almost all of ACT residents (91 percent) recognise the benefits of cat containment, being that

contained cats are a lower risk to wildlife, are less likely to be a nuisance to the community and are less likely to be injured, lowering vet bills.

Recent public debates on cat containment have given the impression that community sentiment in support of cat containment has strengthened since this time, and the Conservation Council will be keen to hear what feedback has been received by the Government during this consultation process, especially via the online survey.

STRATEGY 6: Reduce impacts of feral cats

The Conservation Council supports feral cats being listed as a threatening process under ACT Nature Conservation Act and an Action Plan for feral cats being developed. Feral cats have direct negative impacts on native fauna through predation. They prey on mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates.

We also strongly support the action to undertake feral cat control where it is feasible, cost-effective and delivers a conservation benefit

Any action to increase cat-free conservation areas by expanding predator-proof fences in nature reserves should be targeted to protect high quality habitat and managed appropriately considering the lessons already learned with the Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary.

We note that in the 2011 ACT Community Survey, residents indicated that the following criteria are of high to very high importance when considering feral cat control methods. The control method should:

- not pose a risk to public safety;
- be effective in reducing the impacts of feral cats;
- not pose a risk to animals other than feral cats; and
- not cause suffering to feral cats.

STRATEGY 7: Engage rural landholders in improved cat management

With many rural lands in the ACT containing important remnant habitats, such as grassy woodlands, engagement of rural landholders in improved cat management is important. The Conservation Council supports the government's proposals for cat management measures in rural areas, acknowledging that many rural leases abut cat containment suburbs and important habitats. The management of cats in rural areas as well as suburban areas, will help cut the number of roaming cats and semi-owned or feral cats, thus mitigating threats to important woodland birds.