



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL**
ACT REGION

Submission: Inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats in Australia

AUGUST 2020

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 1981. We work to protect our environment through advocacy, community engagement and campaigning.

We campaign to:

- cut greenhouse emissions
- protect biodiversity in our urban and natural areas
- protect and enhance our waterways
- reduce our waste and improve urban sustainability, and
- promote sustainable transport and planning for our city.

As the peak body, we advocate on behalf of and support our more than 45 member groups, which have a combined membership of over 20,000 people. We collaborate with Government, business and the community to advocate for the highest quality environment for Canberra and the ACT region.

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Introduction

The Conservation Council ACT Region welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on domestic and feral cats in Australia to the Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy. Following the widespread devastation caused by the unprecedented drought and bushfires across Australia last summer, native species populations have suffered dramatically, with figures estimating losses into the billions. The creation of vast, barren landscapes as a result of these bushfires have provided favourable conditions for roaming and feral cats, making it easier for them to prey on already vulnerable populations. Support for better feral animal management has strengthened following these events. As such, appropriate management of feral and roaming cats has never been more important or pressing.

As an advocate for the environment in the ACT region, the negative impact of roaming domestic and feral cats on native 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 were declared in 2004. Our work has seen a shift in community attitudes towards cat containment, with general acceptance that cat containment delivers benefits for local wildlife and for the wellbeing of resident's pets. There is nationwide support for better domestic cat management¹, and Australia's cities now have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership in managing the coexistence between pet-owning communities and local wildlife.

The Council has long advocated for cat management strategies that prioritise animal welfare and the ongoing health of native wildlife populations, including full cat containment and strong community education to be implemented across the ACT. We support cat management strategies on both a regional and national scale for the benefits it provides to wildlife, and to domestic cats.

A. The prevalence of feral and domestic cats in Australia

Cats are one of Australia's most popular household pets. In addition to providing companionship, they are well-loved by their owners for promoting a sense of wellbeing and responsibility.² Cats are generally classified in accordance with their ownership; domestic, stray or feral. Cats that are domestic are usually owned, live with and are cared for by residents, however many domestic cats are still permitted to roam unsupervised throughout day and night hours, whilst stray and feral cats roam unrestricted.

Across Australia, it is estimated that just over one-quarter, or 27% of households own a pet cat, with about half of these households owning two or more.³ Within the ACT, cat-owning households represent approximately one-quarter of Canberra residences. The total domestic cat population in Australia is estimated at 3.8 million, yet Australia's total cat population is

¹ Legge, S., Woinarski, J., Dickman, C., Murphy, B., Woolley- L-A & Calver, M. (2020) 'We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife', CSIRO Publishing, (p.11).

² Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2010). *Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT*, (p.5).

³ Dielenberg, J., Murphy, B., Dickman, C., Woinarski, J., Woolley, L-A., Calver, M. & Legge, S. (2020). 'One cat, one year, 110 native animals: lock up your pet, its a killing machine', *The Canberra Times*.

largely unknown as we still do not have a good understanding of national stray and feral populations.

B. The impact of feral and domestic cats on native wildlife and habitats.

Whilst great domestic companions, roaming cats have significant negative impacts on native wildlife. This is well documented, with new estimates suggesting that Australia's feral cats alone kill approximately 3 billion animals per year.³ Cats have been the leading cause of Australia's 34 mammal extinctions since 1788 and continue to play a large part in the decline of at least 123 other threatened native species listed under national environment law.³

More recently, greater emphasis has been placed on the impact of Australia's pet cats. Across the nation, roaming pet cats kill roughly 390 million animals per year³, and while this number reflects less than that of feral cats, the density of cats in urban areas remains significant. Roaming pet cats in our urban areas kill thirty to fifty-times more animals per square kilometre than cats in the bush, and seventy-one percent of the national domestic cat population are still allowed outside to roam and hunt.³

There are three main concerns with roaming cats. These are the predation of native wildlife, nuisance behaviour and animal welfare.

Cats, regardless of their ownership status, are prone to roaming and hunting both day and night. Canberra's owned, free-roaming cats alone are estimated to prey on approximately 61,000 native birds, 2000 native mammals, 30,000 native reptiles and 6000 native frogs every year.⁴ The ACT is home to 52 species of flora and fauna listed as threatened under national and/or ACT environmental law. With approximately 75% of Canberra's suburbs located within 1km of threatened fauna habitat³ and almost half of the ACT's cat-owning population allowing their domestic cats to roam unsupervised in daylight⁵, the risks to Canberra's local wildlife are significant.

In 2008, the RSPCA categorised the cause of injury of 1798 animals brought to its Canberra shelter. Of this, 252 animals were injured by cats, including 32 species of native bird, two species of bat, two species of lizard and the brushtail possum.⁶ More recently, small marsupials including two species of antechinus and a dunnart have disappeared from Canberra's nature parks where they were once common. These animals now only thrive within the predator proof fence at Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary.³

Consideration must also be given to the indirect impacts of predation. Native animals that have experienced predation are more likely to alter their behaviour to avoid future encounters with predators.⁵ Intimidation by cats can result in local wildlife staying closer to their habitations, therefore reducing the variety of food and other resources available. This not only results in nutritional deficiencies and reduced life expectancies of native wildlife, but

⁴ Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate 2019, *Draft ACT Cat Plan 2019-29*, ACT Government, Canberra.

⁵ Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate 2019, *Listening Report - Draft ACT Cat Plan*, ACT Government, Canberra.

⁶ Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2010). *Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT*, (p.7).

also affects the longer term survival of native species.⁵ This has been documented in Western Australia, where the disturbance and hunting of just one pet cat and one stray cat caused changes in seabird nesting behaviour and the abandonment of young chicks, ultimately resulting in the total breeding failure of a colony of more than 100 pairs of fairy terns.⁷

Allowing cats to roam also has implications on the cat's welfare. Roaming cats are more likely to demonstrate nuisance behaviour, including engaging in fights with other cats.⁵ Not only are cats that roam more susceptible to disease and injury, it also enhances their risk of being hit by a car.⁶ In 2011, an ACT Government survey demonstrated that uncontained cats are four times more likely to suffer significant injuries at least once a year than those that are contained at all times.⁸ In particular, a third of all roaming cats were found to come home injured at least once a year, with two-thirds of these occasions requiring vet care as a result of the injuries.⁷

C. The effectiveness of current legislative and regulatory approaches

The success of legislative and regulatory approaches to manage cats relies heavily on the compliance of cat-owning communities and the enforcement of regulations, yet many states fail to continually enforce cat laws once they are implemented.

The ACT is currently a national leader in addressing the impacts of domestic roaming cats on wildlife, with de-sexing and microchipping legislated, full cat containment enforced in suburbs across the city and a Draft ACT Cat Plan (2019-2029) in place. The ACT can now work towards moving to set city-wide cat containment across the whole of Canberra. Cat containment can currently be declared in any suburb, or area of a suburb in the ACT where there is a serious nature conservation threat as a result of cat activities. Suburbs including Crace, Jacka and Denman Prospect are already declared as containment areas to control roaming cats in the city. Within these areas, it is a legal requirement to contain cats 24 hours a day, with fines up to \$1500 for residents who fail to comply. This is implemented and enforced, pursuant to the Domestic Animals Act 2000, by designation of the Minister. New suburbs in the ACT, including those in Gungahlin and Molonglo Valley, are set to become cat containment areas in the near future.

A downfall with current legislative and regulatory approaches to cat management across the nation is its inadequacy in providing linkages between cat regulation and the protection of native species. Applying cat controls on an ad-hoc basis means there is no explicit link with other conservation efforts, making it more difficult to achieve coordinated and effective biodiversity conservation and predation management.⁹ The Conservation Council supports feral cats being listed as a threatening process under the ACT Nature Conservation Act, with an appropriate action plan developed. This would provide greater focus on the threat of cats to wildlife in the ACT.

⁷ Dielenberg, J., Murphy, B., Dickman, C., Woinarski, J., Woolley, L-A., Calver, M. & Legge, S. (2020). 'One cat, one year, 110 native animals: lock up your pet, its a killing machine', *The Canberra Times*.

⁸ Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate 2020, *Cat Containment*, ACT Government, Canberra.

⁹ Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2014). Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT, Background Paper, (p.8).

D. The effectiveness of Commonwealth action and cooperation with states and territories on this issue

States and territories across Australia have implemented varying degrees of cat management, however nationally, engagement in domestic cat management is relatively low.⁹ While the ACT has implemented cat containment suburbs, where 24 hour cat containment is legislated in containment suburbs, other states such as South Australia have very few regulatory controls to manage the impacts of domestic roaming cats on wildlife.⁹

Differences in cat management across Australia can impact on how the community perceives cat management strategies, sending conflicting messages to cat-owning communities and negatively influencing the community's perceptions of management strategies like containment. Greater consistency across jurisdictions with regard to legislation and management would provide a clearer framework for responsible cat ownership and also enhance community awareness of the benefits of managing cats.

The Commonwealth has recognised the threat of feral cats to native wildlife by listing predation by feral cats as a key threatening process under the EPBC Act 1999. A threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats (2015) was subsequently implemented that sets a national framework to guide and coordinate Australia's response to the impacts of feral cats on biodiversity. This has assisted to streamline research and management across Australia's jurisdictions to ensure the long-term survival of native species and ecological communities affected by feral cat predation.

Greater emphasis should now be placed on addressing urban cats, which have an equal if not greater impact per square kilometre on native wildlife.⁷ Whilst the feral cat threat abatement plan acknowledges the impacts of domestic cats and the importance of responsible cat ownership, the Commonwealth has yet to adopt a leadership role in encouraging jurisdictions to strengthen cat management strategies and policies. Management of feral cats including humane shooting and trapping is important, but it is tedious and time-consuming. On the other hand, management strategies for domestic cats are cost-effective, require less resources and can be implemented in the short term. Management of roaming domestic cats will not only protect threatened species which already exist within our urban boundaries, such as the Olive Legless Lizard in Gungahlin¹⁰, but also encourage greater diversity of wildlife into residential suburbs.

E. The efficacy, cost effectiveness and use of current and emerging methods and tools for controlling cats

Desexing and Microchipping

The ACT is one of many jurisdictions in Australia to have desexing requirements.¹⁰ Desexing reduces unwanted litters that are otherwise either abandoned to add to the stray/feral cat population, or taken to animal shelters. Desexing also has health benefits for cats, leaving

¹⁰ Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2014). Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT, Background Paper, (p.22).

them less likely to engage in nuisance behaviour that results in injury, disease or death.¹¹ Microchipping can also be an effective management tool to identify, collect and rehome cats that are roaming.

In the ACT, desexing and microchipping are compulsory under the *Domestic Animals Act 2000*. The Conservation Council supports this legislation, and continues to advocate for the ACT Government to explore new ways to encourage cat owners to de-sex and contain cats, including by improving affordability for low income households. For management strategies to be effective, information on the benefits of de-sexing and microchipping must be made available for the community. Community education efforts should unpack on the advantages to cat owners; that de-sexed cats are less likely to wander, and therefore are less likely to become lost, injured or involved in fights that acquire expensive veterinary bills; and that desexed cats generally live longer, healthier lives and are more affectionate companions.¹⁰

Cat registration

Unlike other states including NSW and QLD, the ACT does not require cats to be registered. Yet, findings from the Draft ACT Cat Plan Listening Report¹² illustrated that cat registration held the highest levels of community support as a containment management strategy. Registration provides 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. It also allows the Government to target community education on responsible cat ownership.

As with other states, cat registration would be likely to improve compliance of ACT cat owners undertaking required de-sexing and microchipping of their cat/s. The Conservation Council supports the introduction of cat registration in the ACT to improve the management and welfare of cats across Canberra. However, registration costs should not serve as a disincentive for cat owners to register their pets, and may need to be adjusted to cater for low income households.

Cat containment areas

Many urban areas of Canberra's have residential areas abutting nature reserves or urban open space. Whilst living so close to nature provides many benefits for residents, urban edge effects such as roaming domestic cats continue to have a direct impact on native wildlife populations. Containment of domestic cats to their owner's premises is a crucial strategy to ensure better outcomes for our local environment as well as domestic cats.¹³

In 2004, the new suburbs Forde and Bonner were declared as the first cat containment areas in the ACT. Since then, a further 15 suburbs have been included as 24 hour cat containment areas. This has demonstrated improved outcomes for domestic constrained

¹¹ Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2010). *Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT*, (p.8).

¹² Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate 2019, *Draft ACT Cat Plan 2019-29*, ACT Government, Canberra.

¹³ Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2010). *Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT*, (p.26).

cats in these suburbs which have a life expectancy of 12-15 years, almost double that of a roaming or stray cat.⁸

In 2011, the ACT Government commissioned a telephone survey¹⁴ to collate ACT resident's views on cat containment. Results demonstrated that there is strong support for cat containment across the ACT, with 65 percent of respondents supporting cat containment in all new suburbs of the ACT and 58 percent supporting ACT-wide cat containment. However, the effectiveness of the ACT's existing cat containment laws is reduced due the limited application of cat containment to new suburbs, despite many of Canberra's older suburbs being within close range of the Canberra Nature Park. In addition, there is little enforcement where the laws do apply.⁹

The Draft ACT Cat Plan Listening Report illustrates that cat containment is an effective cat management tool when installed using blanketing methods, with those who already live in containment areas showing greater support for cat containment than those who do not (26% greater). For cat containment to become an effective management tool, Governments must plan for full containment and ensure containment is consistently applied and widely enforced. This includes setting a prescribed date for containment, incorporating cat legislation into new suburbs as they are established, and phasing in containment to non-legislated areas. This should be supported by community education campaigns and information for cat-owners which highlight ownership responsibilities under the relevant legislation and provide information for keeping cats entertained in confinement.

Predator-proof areas

Within the ACT, roaming domestic cats have been recorded travelling up to 900m into nature reserves.¹⁵ Several predator proof fences have been erected in the ACT, such as at Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve, to reduce predation impacts and improve biodiversity outcomes. In many cases, these enclosures have provided a sanctuary for threatened wildlife which otherwise would not survive in the region as a result of predation.¹⁶ However, they are costly and can have unintended consequences on local wildlife if not managed effectively.

The Conservation Council supports the implementation of predator-proof enclosures where appropriate, but acknowledges that more research is required in order for them to be operated and managed in a way that delivers environmental benefit against cat predation on a national scale. Any action to expand predator-proof fences in nature reserves should be targeted to protect high quality habitat and managed appropriately, considering the lessons already learnt from existing enclosures such as Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary.

G. Public awareness and education in relation to the feral and domestic cat problem

¹⁴ Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate 2020, *Cat Containment - Community Research*, ACT Government, Canberra.

¹⁵ Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2014). *Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT*, Background Paper, (p.8).

¹⁶ ABC News, (2015). '[Eastern Bettong numbers booming inside fenced-off reserve in Canberra](#)', News Article, 12 February.

The importance of community education in controlling roaming cats has been widely recognised. Some states, including South Australia and Victoria, have developed campaigns for responsible cat ownership and household management of encounters with stray/feral cats.¹⁷ The Council has long supported that the ACT also facilitates and supports strong, ongoing community education on cat registration, containment, microchipping and de-sexing.

The 2011 ACT Government survey found that almost all of the ACT resident's surveyed recognise the benefits of cat containment (91%), that being that contained cats are a lower risk to wildlife, are less likely to be of nuisance to the community and are less likely to sustain injuries therefore lowering vet bills for owners. Eighty-four percent believed that measures should be taken to control stray cats in the ACT in a manner that supports the health and safety of the public, the cat itself and local wildlife. There was also support shown for managing feral cat populations, however residents noted that it was important that 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.

Whilst cat containment continues to gain support in the ACT as an effective management strategy to prevent domestic cats from roaming, some residents still hold the view that full cat containment is harmful for cats. Campaigns such as the RSPCA's campaign "keeping your cat safe and happy at home" are working to improve the community's understanding of cat management strategies including full containment, and are assisting cat owners to make cat containment safe and entertaining for pet cats. Community education on the benefits for the health and lifespan of cats must be continued and expanded to ensure that misconceptions around containment and other management strategies are addressed.

H. The interaction between domestic cat ownership and the feral cat problem, and best practice approaches to the keeping of domestic cats in this regard.

Roaming domestic cats that are not de-sexed or registered threaten the long-term success of cat management in the landscape as roaming domestic, stray and feral cats are then able to interbreed. Implementing and mandating registration and de-sexing of pet cats across the nation would reduce unwanted litters and, in turn, reduce cat dumping and abandonment incidents. Full cat containment for all domestic cats would improve outcomes further, as domestic cats would then have no opportunity to interact with stray or feral roaming cats.

Governments could enhance efforts to incentivise responsible cat ownership. For example, free de-sexing could be offered to people who adopt and care for a stray cat, or subsidies could be offered to low income households to de-sex their pet cats. This will increase compliance with cat legislation and result in better animal welfare outcomes.

Cat management measures should also be emphasised in rural areas, acknowledging that many rural leases in the ACT and broader region abut cat containment suburbs and important habitats. The management of cats in rural areas will assist in reducing the number of roaming and feral cats, thus mitigating threats to already vulnerable wildlife. The

¹⁷ Eyles, K. & Mulvaney, M. (2010). *Responsible pet ownership and the protection of wildlife: Options for improving the management of cats in the ACT.*

Commonwealth could play a role in facilitating greater engagement with rural lessees and farmers through the inclusion of rural representation into the Feral Cat Taskforce.

Recommendations to the Commonwealth:

1. Maintain a leadership role to develop a coordinated approach to cat management across Australia by encouraging state and territory governments to: share resources, coordinate research and evaluation activities; identify and implement consistent approaches to the management of stray, semi-owned and owned cats; and integrate domestic cat management with feral cat management.¹⁸
2. Expand the existing Key Threatening Process listing for feral cats to include domestic cats. Actions under the threat abatement plan that pertain to domestic cats currently, could be expanded.
3. Support jurisdictions to launch community education campaigns that deliver information and support to cat-owning communities across Australia about responsible cat ownership and the benefits of cat management strategies including 24 hour containment.
4. Broaden stakeholder representation within the Feral Cat Taskforce to include engagement with rural lessees, farmers, local governments, veterinarians, pet traders and the pet food industry.
5. Expand funding for ongoing research into stray and feral cat populations to establish a better understanding of the feral cat population.

¹⁸ RSPCA 2017, *Identifying Best Practice Cat Management in Australia*, Discussion Paper, (p.32).