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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

A history of failure

The attached letter appeared in the Northern Star newspaper (NSW) in 1910. Just over 50 years later the last eastern quoll ever seen on mainland Australia would be found - as a road-killed specimen from Sydney. Letters just like this one; warning of the eastern quolls demise, appeared time and time again until 1961, when the last reference to an extant mainland eastern quoll was published in the Sydney Morning Herald on 17 May (also attached). The Federal or State Government did *nothing* to prevent this tragedy - despite repeated warnings from knowledgeable Australians for over 5 decades.

I undertook my Master of Environmental Management in 2005. I was researching the abundance and diversity of mammals across areas of different land management regimes. I ran a wildlife trapping program in the southern Barrington Tops region; both in State Forest and National Park as well as on private land, following roughly in the footsteps of a researcher, who less than a decade earlier had found healthy populations of spotted-tailed quoll; the largest remaining marsupial carnivore on mainland Australia. All I detected were feral cats.

The current protection model for threatened species and ecological communities in NSW, and indeed Australia, is an unmitigated failure.

- **A Federally funded and coordinated feral pest management program must be established, with the aim of managing feral predator species and other key threatening processes. A primary objective should be the identification of a methodology for permanent pest species removal (viral or fertility control of foxes for example).**

Keeping native animals

Why can an Australian walk into a pet store and purchase a cat? The most single damaging species to Australian wildlife. An indiscriminate killer, exterminating wildlife by predation,

competition, as well as via the transmission of *toxoplasmosis*; a devastating parasite that is fast destroying our remaining native mammal populations.

Yet the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service's very own website states that native animals including the bandicoot, sugar glider and eastern quoll have no place in Australian households and "They generally cannot be enjoyed the same way as a dog or cat".

This is the mentality that will relegate the remaining small to medium sized mammals to extinction in Australia. Many Australians are not looking for the same type of 'enjoyment' as one would obtain from a cat or a dog, and are crying out to be able to interact with our wildlife; to breed our wildlife; to help manage our wildlife. Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974, any attempt to do this at the moment will land a person with a large fine or a prison sentence.

- **A program to actively discourage Australians from keeping non-native pets that are likely to threaten native wildlife must be developed.**
- **A licencing program, keeper-training regime, and native mammal stock monitoring system funded via the trade of native animals should be enacted as a matter of priority for many mammal species including macropods, dasyures, bandicoots, and some possum and glider species.**

The role of the private land holder

Australia must embrace an approach that provides the means for private landowners to better control predators on their land *and entering* their land. This may involve wildlife protection fencing for example, where locally coordinated native animal breeding programs can be established. Access to funding managed from a Federal level is essential to ensure a broad-scale wildlife management regime-shift towards more active wildlife management on private lands.

- **Predator-proofing land on Commonwealth, State and privately managed lands is essential, as it provides longer-term effectiveness against feral predation and competition than traditional 'ad-hoc' pest-management via methods such as shooting or baiting.**
- **A Federal wildlife refuge system and register should be established, and grants to encourage active management (including the breeding of native wildlife on predator-proofed properties) of wildlife on private lands should be established as a matter of urgency.**

Tasmanian devil and other wildlife reintroductions

The Tasmanian devil has been extinct on mainland Australia for approximately 450 years, however may have existed in isolated populations up to the early years of European settlement. The devil should be reintroduced to mainland Australia as a priority. Anecdotal evidence suggests healthy devil populations have prevented the fox from establishing in Tasmania over the past century. Devils may have the ability to compete with foxes on mainland Australia, by preying on cubs and may even suppress cat numbers. Government Authorities must quickly change their over cautious approach to wildlife management and reintroduction programs.

The eastern quoll should also be reintroduced as a priority. If this species can become extinct over its entire mainland range, then it can go extinct in Tasmania. I recently (2010) offered the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service assistance with developing a predator-proof fence in part of Sydney Harbour National Park, to reintroduce quolls; following an approach by a philanthropist looking to financially support a Sydney-based wildlife project. They declined the offer citing 'too much maintenance'. I suspect it was more likely too much effort, or too much red-tape. They told me I could help them pull weeds out though, if I still wanted to assist. This is the attitude that will cause our wildlife to continue its decline.

- **A robust program of wildlife re-introductions should be initiated, with an aim of re-introducing locally-extinct species. This should be undertaken by both Federal and State environment agencies with assistance from community-based organisations and individuals, or vice versa.**
- **Further, if a Government agency wishes not to undertake or participate in a recovery plan for a species, as in the case of NSW for the eastern quoll, then the Government should at least fully support private individuals who wish to launch their own recovery attempt.**

It is a noble thought to suggest that locking up vast tracts of land and providing *protected status* to our wildlife will save it. It is however, an approach that has failed and continues to fail. It is time that wildlife management in Australia became more pro-active, less bureaucratic, and more willing to test novel methods of wildlife management – because the status quo is completely broken.

Rob Brewster
Environmental Scientist, Sydney.

The Vanishing Native Cat.

"If we could only have native cats as numerous now as they were in some parts of the State 20 or 35 years ago the rabbit problem would be settled in six months," remarked a Tarcutta pastoralist the other day, says the "S. M. Herald." On his property at Umbango Creek the cats were to be found in hundreds from about 1865 to 1875, but they disappeared as quickly as they had come, and at the present time they have absolutely vanished from that part of New South Wales. The same story may be told of the Billabong and the region lying between the Great Southern railway line and the Bland Plains, and apparently there is somewhat the same experience in the State generally. A curious thing about the cat is that it does not appear to have been known to exist on the Billabong or about Tarcutta or the Upper Murray earlier than 1855 or 1856. Old residents of those parts distinctly remembered when there was no native cats in the country at all. Some of these pioneers had been in the district for more than a decade before there was any sign of the animal. When the cats did come it almost seemed as if they had invaded the country in a night from some other part. At first odd ones were noticed, and then, within a few months, they appeared in hundreds. They became so numerous and such a pest about the poultry houses that Mr. Alex. Macpherson, of Umbango, found it necessary to set about the invention of a means of check-mating them in their nocturnal depredations. Just when he fancied he had succeeded, and was experiencing the indefinable pleasure which comes to the mind of the triumphant discoverer, he awoke one morning to find that the cats had vanished, and that his occupation as an inventor was gone.

For some years—variously estimated to embrace the period from 1860 to 1875—the cats became a serious pest. At night they would raid the huts and any place

the cats became a serious pest. At night they would raid the huts and any place where food was to be found, and attack the poultry with deadly effect. Although only about half the size of an average domestic cat, and of slender build, this indigenous creature would play havoc with all kinds of poultry. One cat has been known to kill as many as 15 ducks in a night. They would not eat the body, but merely gash the throat and suck the blood. Every morning scores of birds would be found lying about dead, but with no wounds on the body with the exception of the one in the throat. In regard to the strange disappearance of the creature the various explanations which may apply to the dying out of others of the mammalian tribes throw no satisfactory light on this subject. On the Hunter, and throughout the wheat belt of the State, it is easy enough to account for the disappearance of the native cat. Where the country has been settled and cleared of timber of all kinds the animal simply cannot exist. It is described by naturalists as "terrestrial and arboreal," but as a matter of fact this species of the feline family was of entirely terrestrial habit, so far as could be observed in this country. It lived and had its nests in dead logs, and foraged on the ground, taking to a tree only under exceptional circumstances, and when no other avenue of escape was available. It is consequently feasible that the clearing off of timber for agriculture, or for improving grazing land, would have the effect of driving the cats from that part of the country. But this affords no explanation of the vanishment of the animals from the Bilabong and the Tarcutta region. There is ample cover for them still in this locality; indeed, the primitive woods are existing over hundreds of miles of country, while the flesh food upon which the cats lived is a thousand-fold more abundant, as the result of the invasion of the rabbit, than ever it was in the pre-settlement days.

Other explanations given tentatively are that the trapping and shooting and the

poisoning of the creature by means of phosphorus are responsible for its disappearance. There is absolutely nothing in any of these theories. The cat had come and gone, in the region of which the writer has knowledge, long before the rabbit had become a serious pest or phosphorus poisoning was introduced for coping with it. As to the trapping, that explanation is also not in any sense substantial. The native cat has a pretty fur; there are two colors in this particular species, but the difference is merely a difference of coloration, not of type. The most common was the greyish-yellow with white spots, while the more attractive black with white spots was in about the same ratio to the others as colored rabbits are to the dominant tint. But in those days, whatever might be the case now, there was no market for the fur, and consequently no inducement for anyone to trap the cats. Settlers here and there made war upon them, it is true; but they were so numerous that this would have no more effect than the shooting of rabbits would have now. Like the rabbit, too, the cat is a most prolific breeder. It was a common thing to find a "nest" with broods of six and eight young ones. Once the writer saw a log cut open, and within there were eight pretty little young ones—black with white spots—sucking at the teats of the dead mother, which had evidently been poisoned and had reached her home to die. Even as tiny kittens they are extremely vicious, and will spit and snort and snap at anyone coming near them, and give vent to a harsh, nasal cry, which jars most unpleasantly on the ears.

The curious feature of the case is that the cats disappeared from many parts of the country, not gradually, as if they had died off from some disease or had been reduced by the incoming of settlement, but just as if they had organised an exodus among themselves, and had gone in the manner of migratory birds with the change of the season.

The period in which they vanished from the Billabong is affirmed by competent observers to have been well within 12 months, and this at a time when there was little or no settlement, and rabbit poisoning was unknown. Like the swarms of field mice which once swept over the country, they seemed to come from no one knew where, and, after a few years' stay, to go almost as suddenly as they had come. There is no doubt that if the native cat (*Dasyurus*) could be reintroduced into the country in the numbers to be met with 80 or 85 years ago we should have a revolution in regard to the rabbit pest. These slim, tigerish creatures could go anywhere the smallest rabbit could go. No part of a burrow no hollow limb or log, would afford the rabbit the slightest protection from this bloodthirsty weasel-like foe. As an enemy of the rabbit the native cat is just what is required, because it kills for blood, and does not bother about flesh when plenty of the other diet is available. If one cat would kill a score of poultry in a night, how many rabbits could be disposed of is we had sufficient of these rare animals? At a modest estimate a cat would kill 100 rabbits per week, and 1000 of them would account for 5,000,000 rabbits in the course of a year. In the old days, before the rabbit, the cat was something of a pest itself. Under present circumstances it would probably not trouble about raiding larders or poultry roosts, with millions of rabbits about.

The possibilities of using the cat for ex-

terminating the rabbit seem sufficiently promising at least to justify an effort being made to test the practicability of the suggestion. To what extent has this creature vanished from the whole of the State? If inquiries were made among old residents of the different parts,

this question could be answered with some degree of certainty; and then, the position being defined, something might be done with the view of protecting and fostering the cats, instead of allowing them to be killed off altogether. If suitable conditions were established it is possible that they would soon become numerous enough to be turned to effective account in fighting the rabbit.

Sir,—As one who has lived in Vacluse for 50 years, I would like to state emphatically that a marine drive from Rose Bay to Nielsen Park would be a slur on our lovely district.

Apart from spoiling the foreshores themselves and creating noise and traffic problems, our wildlife, which we love, would be doomed. Among our fauna is the rare native cat, which still exists in Nielsen Park, the only bush-clad park of its size on the southern shores of Port Jackson.

I hope all loyal lovers of Sydney will prevent such a marine drive.

C. V. NATHAN.
Vacluse.
