



The Cat Question

INQUIRY SUBMISSION

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On Cats in Australia

Cats cover around 99 percent of Australia with population estimates ranging from 6 up to 20 million with the true number likely somewhere in the middle as it is almost impossible to get a true count. What is known is that one feral cat will kill an average of a thousand native animals a year and have already directly contributed to the extinction of at least 28 species with another 100 natives in danger. A drastic national effort will be required if we are to protect native Australian wildlife from the foreign pest. With a unique range of animals found nowhere else in the world I strongly believe it is a struggle that should be tenaciously pursued.

Of course most of the feral cats in this country today are the result of domestic cats being allowed to roam and spreading out into the wild which started to occur as early as the 1850's. There are around 2.5 million domestic cats owned at this time with most of the owners uneducated about the devastating effects of letting their cats wander each night, as it has been found that even well fed cats will still kill for fun with cats only eating 1 out of every 4 successfully hunted prey.

Feral cats have been found to grow up to 3x larger than domestic cats and are most probably responsible for the occasional "panther" sightings that appear around the country. Feral cats are capable of taking prey half their own size resulting in Possums, Quolls, and Penguins not being safe. Cats are exceptional hunters and our wildlife are simply not adapted to deal with so large a threat.

Below I have formulated strategies and opinions to combat both domestic and feral cats in Australia, critique the effectiveness of current legislative and regulatory approaches, as well as strongly advocate for a national advertising and education campaign to draw the attention of the masses to the ever present danger and serious consequences to not taking strong and immediate action. Feral cats are arguably Australia's biggest threat to the existence of natives and are the worst of all of our invasive pest species. The below recommendations are thus reasonable and proportionate to the challenge of the pest we must face.

On Domestic Cats & Stray Cats in Urban Environments

There is a sensitive nature in which the problem of domestic and urban cats must be talked about as there are people whom view cats as loved pets and would hold reservations about even the most logical approach the controlling of cats. It is rare that an animal can be both pest and pet simultaneously. This is why it is of the upmost importance that finances be directed towards advertising campaigns designed to arouse general public support for the below written control measures whilst also informing cat owners of the duty, responsibility and importance of their cooperation.

The first control measure that I will suggest is one that is already partially in place in certain suburbs within the Australian Capital Territory. This is the Cat Containment Zone. A cat containment zone requires owners of cats living in that zone to have their cats confined to their premises 24 hours a day, cats can be outside when in an enclosed cat run or on a leash. Currently this program only exists in Canberra's newer suburbs. It is my strong belief that this practice should be implemented throughout all the ACT suburbs and Australia as a whole. It should be punishable by law for anyone in the country to allow their domestic cats to roam outside at will.

It should also be a requirement of cat ownership that cats are de-sexed at the earliest availability. This practice is to ensure that if a cat should escape a property or be deliberately let out it cannot mate with existing feral or free roaming cats in surrounding areas. This is of vital importance as study's utilizing GPS collars has shown that some cats travel up to 3 kilometers a night, making an encounter with another cat highly likely.

On the question of free roaming or previously domestic felines that inhabit urban areas and are an extra problem that wildlife in built up areas contend with, more pernicious and effective methods will have to be employed. It should be legal, acceptable and encouraged that people are able to set up specifically designed and already available cat traps on their own properties. A cat that is trapped in this manner should be immediately taken to the closest veterinary clinic or animal shelter to undergo microchip scans. If a chip is read then the owner should be contacted to retrieve the animal and receive a small fine for the offence. A cat trapped for a second time or in any circumstance where no microchip is found then the animal should be assumed feral and euthanized immediately. Though it may seem a more extreme tactic, there are many citizens with a keen sense of national interest that see feral cats in their neighborhood on a daily basis but are presently powerless to improve the native biodiversity of their immediate surrounds. This would be an effective method to reduce the number of unwanted and predatory pests from Australia's cities and towns where there are high concentrations of cats present.

On Feral Cats

Feral cats in Australia are likely never to be completely eradicated due to their commonness, solitary behavior and their natural aversion to people. Success has been seen though with the total extermination of all cats from Macquarie Island and New Haven station with Kangaroo Island undertaking similar efforts. These campaigns were prosperous because they targeted a naturally or artificially enclosed area. By cats being removed from the aforementioned locations, species can be safely introduced into these areas and be allowed to slowly build their numbers back to sustainable levels.

With this proven system in mind the government should take the approach of finding suitable locations around the nation to fence off and then proceed to promptly reduce the number of cats inside said enclosure to zero. The infrastructure for such a program is significantly costly. Ways to mitigate this expense that could be considered are a levy or tax of the purchase feline pets, associated equipment and foodstuffs. When the enclosure has been constructed further savings in the expulsion of the cats from the target area could be achieved by utilizing the firearm owner's community to humanely shoot and trap the pests in that location. It is my estimation as a member of this community that people would readily participate in this activity on a purely voluntary basis at their own expense.

The firearm and hunting enthusiasts are being largely overlooked as a whole when it comes to controlling and reducing feral cats. The Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats does not consider ways in which this group could be more effective and mostly focuses on more large scale solutions such as ariel baiting that kills non-target species and is a slow death for the animal. Reducing unnecessary red tape and increasing the area where cats can be targeted to national parks are two ways this could be achieved. Currently to be able to shoot cats in NSW state forests requires excessive and difficult to understand instructions. As it is not enough to pass the test to obtain a firearms license, pass the safety and knowledge test to receive a hunting license. One is then expected to create an account through the Department of Primary Industries website and complete more online tests. A more streamlined system where someone holding an R license can simply seek permission for their preferred dates and then go would increase the amount of participation and reduce numbers of feral cats in state forests.

Placing a nationwide bounty on cats similar to that already in place in states such as Victoria on dogs and foxes would encourage the active targeting of feral cats. This is an important rewards system as cats are not a particularly useful carcass when compared to other feral game such as deer and goats. Cat pelts are on occasion utilized, Barry Green of Kangaroo Island being the foremost pioneer in this craft, but the meat is not of a high standard and typically not suited for human consumption. Therefore a bounty compensates the shooters effort and reduces or eliminates the expenses involved. A price of around fifty dollars per cat would seem sufficient when compared to other bounty prices.

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