

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia

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Australian Government

**National
Landcare
Program**



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RSPCA Australia
PO Box 265
Deakin West ACT 2600
Australia

Tel: (02) 6282 8300
Fax: (02) 6282 8311
Email: rspca@rspca.org.au
Website: www.rspca.org.au

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1 Cat categories

Various definitions have been used to categorise cats in different populations, but most share a common basis in that they describe some aspect of a cat's relationship with humans.

The lack of universally agreed cat definitions causes confusion and conflict creating inconsistencies in legislation and difficulties in implementing cat management initiatives.

Cat management strategies aimed at influencing human behaviour must recognise the ownership status of cats as well as their level of socialisation to, dependence on and relationship with humans.

The most important definitional delineation is between feral and domestic cats as this has profound consequences for the treatment and fate of individual cats.

Recommendation 1

All jurisdictions should define all cats with some dependence (direct or indirect) on humans as **domestic** cats. Cats who are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans and reproduce in the wild should be defined as **feral** cats.

Domestic cats (including owned/semi-owned and unowned cats) should be excluded from the legal definition of feral cats. This will achieve greater consistency in implementing management programs, legislation, research and evaluation activities as well as engendering community support.

Cat management strategies should recognise three subcategories of domestic cats using the following definitions:

- **Owned** – these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person, and are directly depending on humans. They are usually sociable although sociability varies.
- **Semi-owned** – these cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider they own them. They are of varying sociability with many socialised to humans and may be associated with one or more households.
- **Unowned** – these cats are indirectly depending on humans with some having casual and temporary interactions with humans. They are of varying sociability, including some who are unsocialised to humans, and may live in groups.

2 Cat management legislation

Domestic cat management is legislated at both the state/territory and local government level. Some states have combined companion animal legislation whilst others have separate legislation for dogs and cats. There is no state-based cat management legislation in the Northern Territory (NT). Provisions for cat management may also be enacted by local government in the form of council bylaws.

There are significant inconsistencies in the provisions of domestic cat management legislation and bylaws.

In most states there are overlapping provisions between different types of legislation affecting cats, which can cause confusion or conflict amongst stakeholders and have a detrimental effect on how domestic cats are managed.

The purpose of cat management legislation is not always clearly stated. The Tasmanian *Cat Management Act 2009* makes specific reference to the management of domestic, unowned and feral cats that is not evident in other state legislation.

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Recommendation 2

The significant inconsistencies between states/territories and between local councils, in legislation, approach and level of commitment to domestic cat management, need to be urgently addressed. State and territory jurisdictions should work together to share resources, coordinate research and evaluation activities and identify and implement consistent approaches to the management of unowned, semi-owned and owned cats.

3 Cat management advisory groups

Some states have established cat management advisory groups that can play an important role in monitoring and evaluating cat management strategies.

Recommendation 3

State governments should consider establishing a cat management advisory group with terms of reference that include:

- advising and advocating on changes to state and local government legislation
- monitoring the implementation of cat management legislation and compliance with mandatory requirements
- consulting with key stakeholders
- developing relevant codes of practice (COPs) and standard operating procedures (SOPs) for cat management
- identifying key metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of cat management strategies
- funding relevant research and evaluation.

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4 Cat management plans

A cat management plan may be a useful tool for local councils to identify key priorities, develop strategic and operational plans as well as evaluation measures.

Local councils require support and financial resources to implement effective cat management programs.

Development and distribution of templates for cat management plans and other relevant documents as well as SOPs would greatly assist councils.

Key data relating to cat management is either not collected or inconsistent information is recorded making it difficult to evaluate and compare management strategies.

Recommendation 4

State governments should encourage and support local councils to develop and implement cat management plans that include:

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- defining and quantifying cat management aspects with a focus on impact
- setting clear, achievable and consistent objectives
- using humane, ethical and sustainable strategies
- identifying the responsibilities of key stakeholders
- consideration of owned, unowned and semi-owned cats
- securing sufficient resources for implementation
- facilitating the collection and storage of standardised data
- formally evaluating management strategies using agreed measures.

5 Community collaboration

Community collaboration has successfully contributed to humane domestic cat support and management in several locations across Australia.

Councils that partner with reputable local welfare/rescue groups are able to meet public expectations by cost-effectively minimising the number of healthy, adoptable cats killed and increasing the number of desexed domestic cats adopted into the community.

Formal written agreements help ensure key roles and responsibilities are agreed by all parties engaging in a collaborative partnership.

Recommendation 5

Best practice cat management requires the involvement of all stakeholders in decision making and solutions. Where possible, councils and cat welfare groups should establish formal collaborative partnerships to implement humane and effective cat support and management programs.

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6 Feral cat management

Declaring feral cats as a pest under state legislation is regarded by many as a key step in recognising that urgent action is required to address their impacts.

However, there is a high level of public concern that this has a detrimental impact on the treatment of both feral and domestic cats, including inciting deliberate cruelty and unlawful killing.

Ensuring the definition of a feral cat excludes domestic cats (see Recommendation 1), recognising all cats as sentient animals, and avoiding demonising feral cats in information materials may help mitigate this.

Some of the issues arising from overlapping definitions of feral and domestic cats could be avoided through better coordination between government departments.

Recommendation 6

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A coordinated approach to the management of feral and domestic cats is essential to ensure that laws and strategies are complementary, not opposing, and that no vital aspects in terms of definitions, responsibilities and initiatives are overlooked. Legislation to control feral cats must recognise that they are sentient animals capable of experiencing pain, suffering and distress, and provide protection from cruelty.

7 Animal welfare impacts of control methods

Best practice feral cat management requires an understanding of the animal welfare impacts (humaneness) of control techniques and how to carry them out in the best possible way.

All existing control methods for feral cats cause some pain, suffering or distress. more humane methods need to be developed and adopted as a matter of urgency.

Mechanisms to improve standards include mandatory compliance with a COP and SOPs, reviewing SOPs, developing additional SOPs for all new methods and requiring the most humane techniques to be used.

Recommendation 7

Practitioners responsible for implementing feral (and domestic) cat management should have an understanding of the animal welfare impacts of available methods, and know how to carry them out in the best way possible. Compliance with COPs and SOPs for the humane treatment of cats, should be a mandatory requirement for cat management activities.

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8 Semi-owned cats

Shelters and rescue groups have applied considerable creative thinking and resources to try to increase cat adoption rates. Despite these efforts, large numbers of cats (including unowned/semi-owned cats) are still not being adopted.

Increasing the number of local councils who promote the adoption of impounded cats could alleviate the burden on cat rescue groups and shelters. Specifically identifying and targeting semi-owners of cats could help reduce surrender rates and the number of semi-owned cats living in the community.

Recommendation 8

Cat management plans and strategies should recognise semi-owned cats as a separate category to unowned cats and ensure that cat semi-owners are specifically targeted in education, desexing and other relevant cat management programs.

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9 Trapping programs

Unconfined owned cats and semi-owned cats can be affected by trap and kill measures in addition to the unowned cats targeted.

Trap and kill programs in peri-urban and urban areas are very difficult to effectively implement. Ineffective implementation results in failure to reduce cat numbers in the long term and consequently no significant improvement for issues of concern such as wildlife predation.

The community is increasingly opposed to lethal cat control programs, particularly in urban areas.

Some councils who are involved in cat trapping also promote adoption of trapped unowned and socialised cats on a small scale.

Recommendation 9

Trap and kill programs should not be considered as an effective long-term solution to cat management. Where trapping is used, procedures should follow best practice and include a community education program and a process for adoption of kittens and cats.

10 TNR programs

There are reports of trap, neuter, return (TNR) programs stabilising and reducing unowned and semi-owned cat populations.

Poor implementation is likely to have contributed to unsuccessful TNR programs where substantial and persistent reductions in cat populations have not been demonstrated.

Data on the impact on wildlife have not been collected or reported in association with successful TNR programs.

Ten factors are identified which contribute to successful TNR programs, including high levels of desexing in a targeted area, removal of kittens and socialised adults for adoption, monitoring and rapid desexing of immigrant cats, strong community engagement, and support and ongoing data collection and evaluation.

Concern over the use of TNR could be mitigated by specifying conditions on its use, ensuring adoption of cats is an integral part of the program (this approach is termed TDARS or trap, desex, adopt or return and support) and assessing the effect on wildlife predation.

Recommendation 10

A research study should be conducted to evaluate whether, and under what specific circumstances, a program of trap, desex, adopt or return and support (TDARS) is an appropriate tool for urban cat management under Australian conditions.

11 Targeted low-cost desexing of semi-owned cats

Targeted low-cost desexing programs for semi-owned cats could help improve the welfare and reduce the numbers of semi-owned cats and kittens born.

Education programs targeting cat semi-owners are a vital component of any strategy aimed at trying to manage semi-owned cats.

Allowing semi-owned cats to be desexed and remain with their semi-owner, even if the semi-owner cannot or will not take full 'ownership' would require the revision and clarification of current cat classification systems in some jurisdictions.

Recommendation 11

A research study should be conducted to evaluate whether a targeted low-cost desexing program, combined with education of cat semi-owners, is an effective tool for managing semi-owned cats.

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12 Rental access

Significant progress has been made in reducing cat surrender through initiatives from animal welfare organisations.

An important factor in surrender and abandonment of cats is the limited availability of cat-friendly rental accommodation. Changes to tenancy laws and promoting the advantages of renting to pet owners may help to improve this.

Cat abandonment continues despite being illegal under animal welfare legislation in all states/territories in Australia.

Recommendation 12

Cat surrender and abandonment could be reduced through increasing the availability of cat-friendly rental accommodation and promoting the value of the human-cat bond.

13 Cat containment

Cat containment regulations need to mandate 24-hour containment, rather than night-time curfews, if they are to significantly reduce wildlife predation, breeding of unwanted cats and cat nuisance.

Enforcement of cat containment regulations can prove difficult.

Implementation of cat containment should be preceded by programs to educate owners about the benefits of containment and how to ensure the welfare of contained cats.

More data are needed on the impact of cat containment on prevention of wildlife predation, health and welfare of confined pet cats and risks associated with cat trapping.

The greatest benefit from cat containment would come from combining these regulations with mandatory desexing and identification (so that cats found outdoors can be identified as owned), and strategies to manage unowned cats.

Recommendation 13

Education programs are needed to increase the acceptance and uptake of 24-hour cat containment, with subsequent regulation in areas of high conservation value.

14 Identification

Microchipping is an extremely valuable tool for cat identification and data collection.

Microchipping has some limitations in terms of accuracy of owner details and requires a scanner to identify cats, which can delay cats being reunited with their owner.

There are benefits for cats to also wear a collar and identification tag.

Recommendation 14

Cat management plans should aim to increase the number of cats who are identified through mandatory microchipping.

15 Mandatory desexing

There is mixed evidence on whether mandatory desexing legislation has contributed to reducing shelter and pound intake and euthanasia rates in Australia.

Where mandatory desexing has not achieved these aims, evidence indicates this is due to a lack of active enforcement of legislation and low public awareness of its requirements.

A number of factors have been identified which, if implemented in parallel with mandatory desexing, are likely to increase the success of this strategy.

Recommendation 15

Mandatory desexing has the potential to be successful in reducing shelter and pound intake and euthanasia rates where it is well-promoted within the community, supported by veterinary practitioners, targeted at pre-pubertal desexing prior to sale or transfer, supported through targeted low-cost desexing programs and adequately enforced.

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16 Targeted low-cost desexing of owned cats

Targeted low-cost desexing programs for owned cats have significant potential to reduce cat overpopulation and also generally receive strong community support.

Income and geographic targeting can be successfully used to determine eligibility for these programs.

Recommendation 16

Increasing access to targeted low-cost desexing initiatives, especially areas of low socio-economic status or those overrepresented in shelter and pound intakes, should be considered a key strategy for domestic cat management.

17 Pre-pubertal desexing

Cats need to be desexed prior to four months of age to prevent first litters. Pre-pubertal desexing has benefits for the welfare of individual cats as well as assisting cat management in terms of reducing unwanted cat numbers.

Recommendation 17

The promotion of pre-pubertal desexing as normal practice is key to reducing the number of unwanted kittens born. Engagement with cat owners and the veterinary community is vital to increase acceptance and uptake of pre-pubertal desexing by veterinary practitioners.

18 Cats per household

Limiting the number of cats that can be kept may assist in reducing public nuisance from cats, preventing kitten farms and resolving cases of animal hoarding.

Most councils have a standard maximum limit of two cats per household, however, many households successfully care for more than two cats and increasing this limit may help increase cat adoptions.

Recommendation 18

Council limits on the number of cats that can be kept per household without a permit should be set at four cats rather than two, on the condition that all cats are desexed, microchipped, contained and well cared for.

19 Cat owner education

A combination of consistent public messages from government and animal welfare organisations, education programs in schools and social marketing campaigns can result in positive progress for cat management.

Legislation alone is not an effective instrument for addressing cat population, nuisance and predatory issues.

The use of best-practice principles of behaviour change and persuasive communication to improve the design of education programs should be encouraged.

Recommendation 19

Changing community attitudes, beliefs and behaviours should be a key component of every strategy to manage cat populations. Education programs should focus on increasing cat owner understanding of the benefits of cat management, such as containment, identification and desexing of their cat, and for decreasing euthanasia of kittens and cats in shelters and pounds.

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20 Reporting and evaluation

Evaluation of cat management strategies is essential in order to determine their effectiveness. Key evaluation measures and processes for data collection need to be agreed by all stakeholders and applied to all new and existing initiatives.

There is an urgent need for standardisation and reporting of shelter/pound admission and outcomes data if they are to be accessible for evaluation purposes.

Evaluation of different management strategies and programs is either not undertaken, reported or not easily accessible.

Recommendation 20

Key stakeholders should agree on measures to be used to enable comparative evaluation of cat management strategies and programs. Evaluation outcomes should be reported and incorporated into the development of cat management plans at the national, state and local level.

21 Research

Research related to cat management is generally undertaken in an ad hoc manner focusing on a specific area rather than as part of an integrated and coordinated approach.

Several areas for further investigation have already been identified but there is a lack of adequate research funding for this.

Recommendation 21

Further research is required to inform future cat management strategies and ensure that limited resources are effectively targeted. This will require allocation of resources, coordination and priority setting at a national level.

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