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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

6 December 2024

Animal Welfare Committee

NSW Parliament

Via email: animal.welfare@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Committee members

Submission to Legislative Council Inquiry - Management of cat populations in New South Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Council Inquiry - Management of cat populations in New South Wales. We also appreciate the extension you provided us to make our submission.

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society is a community volunteer organisation with over 850 members, which has been in existence for over 60 years. The Society's aim is to help conserve the natural environment of the Blue Mountains and to increase awareness of the natural environment in general. Information on the Society and the work we do can be found on our website <https://www.bluemountains.org.au>

Greater Blue Mountains Greater World Heritage Area (GBMWAH)

The City of Blue Mountains is one of only two cities in the world surrounded by a UNESCO declared World Heritage National Park Area. The GBMWAH was granted World Heritage status by the United Nations on 29 November 2000 on the basis of two outstanding features of the region - its eucalypt / sclerophyll ecosystems and its biodiversity, both of which are considered to be of global importance. Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area is home to:

- 100 eucalypt species (13% of the global total)
- 80 plant communities with 8% of plants found only in the Blue Mountains
- 265 native birds (one third of Australia's total)
- 52 mammals
- 62 reptiles
- 30 amphibians

The GBMWA and surrounding local government area is home to 160 rare or threatened plants and animals representing approximately 10 percent of the listed threatened species in New South Wales. The high percentage of threatened species is a result of:

- the high biodiversity of the area
- the large number of endemic species, and
- the ongoing impacts of urban development (such as land clearing, urban runoff, sedimentation, habitat disturbance, weed invasion and the impacts of feral and domestic animals).

The threatened species found in the Blue Mountains include a number of endemic species such as Blue Mountains Water Skink, the Giant Dragonfly, and the Dwarf Mountain Pine. The Wollemi Pine, one of the world's oldest and rarest trees, only in the greater Blue Mountains and was only discovered in 1994. More rare and threatened species are still being identified in the GBMWA.

The Blue Mountains is also home to a community of nearly 80,000 people living in 27 towns and villages located over 100 km of mountainous terrain. The Blue Mountains Local Government Area covers 140,377 hectares, 74% of which comprises National Park. Urban development is largely limited to the plateau areas and is spread out along the ridgelines increasing the interface of urban development with the GBMWA. As a result, a significant majority of residential and commercial development directly borders either the national park or native bushland reserves such as council reserves or Crown land.

Blue Mountains Conservation Society – campaigning for the better management of domestic and feral cats

A key challenge for the Blue Mountains community, and a key goal for the Society, is to maintain and protect the GBMWA from the impacts of urban development. This includes protecting the GBMWA, and the plants and animals within it, from the impacts of cats, both domestic and feral. The Society has been actively campaigning to improve the management of feral and domestic cats in the Blue Mountains. This includes:

- The Society has strongly supported and promoted Blue Mountains City Council's 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home' project which encourages cat owners to keep their cats safely contained at home to enhance feline welfare and reduce the negative impacts that cats have on wildlife. The project runs to 2025 and is being delivered by RSPCA NSW with support from Council and provides incentives for cat owners including free or subsidised desexing, cat enclosures and behaviour enrichment advice.
- During the 2023 State Election campaign the Society held a local candidate forum and issued candidates with a questionnaire asking for their views on key environmental issues within the electorate and then promoted their responses widely in mainstream and social media (see <https://www.bluemountains.org.au/elections/se23/se23-questionnaire.shtml>). This included the question *“Will you commit to amending the Companion Animals Act 1998 to enable local governments to regulate roaming pet cats at a local level to reduce predation on wildlife, as recommended by the Local Government Association of NSW and the Invasive Species Council? All candidates who*

responded to the questionnaire and attended the forum (Greens, Animal Justice, Labor, Sustainable Australia Party) supported the proposition, with the ultimately successful Labor candidate committing at the forum to pursuing this reform in government.

- The Society has also campaigned extensively on responsible cat management including through articles, public education forums and videos on social media to raise awareness of the impacts of domestic and feral cats on native wildlife (see <https://www.bluemountains.org.au/elections/se23/se23-threats.shtml#cats>). The Blue Mountains City Council has supported the Society's campaign and passed a motion at the August 29 2023 council meeting to write to several ministers calling for changes to state legislation and greater council powers in managing pet cat control locally (see <https://www.bluemountainsgazette.com.au/story/8328800/now-we-need-the-state-government-to-act-council-urges-greater-cat-control-powers/>).

Impacts of domestic and feral cats on the environment

Pet cats, despite their valued role as companion animals, are a major threat to wildlife. Research has found that collectively, roaming pet cats kill 546 million animals per year in Australia (see <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>). One third of Australian households (33%) have pet cats and the total pet cat population in Australia is 5.3 million. 71% of all pet cats in Australia are able to roam, and 78% of these roaming cats hunt, presenting a major threat to wildlife in their local areas. On average, each roaming, hunting pet cat kills more than three animals every week. Over a year each roaming and hunting pet cat in Australia kills 186 animals, including 110 native animals (40 reptiles, 38 birds and 32 mammals) (see <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>).

Pet cats are concentrated in very high densities in our cities and towns. In suburbs that do not require containment, estimates are there up to 100 roaming and hunting cats per square kilometre. In the bush there's only one feral cat for every three to four square kilometres, so even though each individual feral cat kills about 4 times more animals per year than a pet cat, pet cats inflict a much higher toll per square km in suburbs, than in the bush. (see <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>). Research indicates roaming, hunting pet cats kill 30-50 times more native animals per square kilometre in suburbs than feral cats kill per square kilometre in the bush. Counting only native wildlife, pet cats kill 6,000 to 11,000 native animals per square kilometre each year in urban areas. Research has also found pet cats which reside in homes near bushland, such as vast majority of pet cats in the Blue Mountains, roam the furthest and hunt the most frequently (see <https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Pet-cat-impacts-June-2023.pdf>). As such the management of pet cats has major implications for the GBMWA, especially for the threatened and endemic wildlife only found in the GBMWA such as Blue Mountains Water Skink.

Predation by feral cats is listed as a key threatening process under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* and the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Act*. The Commonwealth government estimates feral cats in Australia kill over 1.5 billion native mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs, and 1.1 billion invertebrates each year. Predation by cats is a recognised threat to over 200 nationally threatened species,

and 37 listed migratory species. They have contributed to the extinction of more than 20 Australian mammal species. They are a major cause of decline for many land-based threatened animals such as the birds and mammals. Many native animals are struggling to survive so reducing the number killed by feral cats will assist populations to grow.

Both feral and domestic cats can also carry infectious diseases such as Toxoplasmosis, which can be transmitted to native animals, domestic livestock and humans. These diseases have a negative impact on the health of native animals and humans.

Management of domestic cats

The Society strongly supports compulsory 24 hour containment of domestic cats. The RSPCA, a peak animal welfare body in Australia, recognises cat containment as the best practice method to keep cats safe, happy and healthy. The Cat Protection Society of NSW also recommends cat containment for the benefits to cat welfare and the protection of native wildlife (see https://catprotection.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/DL-Brochure_Good-Neighbour-Project_2020_FA_WEB.pdf). According to the Cat Protection Society of NSW, the average lifespan of a cat with outdoor access is estimated to be some 10 years shorter than that of an indoor-only cat.

Cats that are allowed to roam have an increased risk of disease, injury and death from:

- Being hit or run over by a car
- Being attacked by a dog
- Fighting with other neighbourhood cats
- Acquiring a serious infection, such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), or toxoplasmosis (which can be transmitted to humans).
- Eating toxic plants or poisons
- Getting stuck down a drain
- Being stolen or abused
- Picking up ticks or fleas
- Being bitten by a venomous snake.

There are many health and welfare benefits for cats that are contained at home including reducing the risk of them getting sick, being hurt or getting run over, thereby giving them a better chance to enjoy a longer and healthier life as well as reducing the risk they will stray and be lost, stolen or impounded by Council.

The management of ferals cats

The Society supports the three policy principles developed by the RSPCA - humane, effective and justifiable – to underpin the management of control feral animals. All control actions for feral cats should be as painless as possible, should be effective in reducing the number of feral cats in a sustainable manner, and be justifiable by aiming to protect and recover key threatened species.

The Society therefore supports the use of humane lethal controls to reduce feral cat populations. The Society believes the impact of not using humane lethal control measures results in increased animal suffering due the ongoing slaughter and maiming of native

species caused by feral cats. Tackling feral cats through humane lethal controls substantially reduces animal suffering. Failing to tackle feral cats means continued killing of millions of native animals, leaving the devastating impact of feral cats unchecked.

The Society does not support trap neuter and release as a feral cat management tool. It is not realistic or feasible to trap neuter and release the thousands of feral cats in the GBWHA, across dense bushland, remote areas and steep terrain. Trap, neuter and release as a feral cat control technique is not humane, effective or justifiable. Returning neutered feral cats to the environment to keep killing and driving extinctions would be inhumane and unjustifiable when the alternative is available for them to be humanely euthanized. Trap, neuter and release is also a highly stressful process for feral cats, transported as wild animals in cages to be neutered and then returned to the wild, and could not be considered humane.

Society recommendations to the inquiry

The Society strongly supports the following legislative and policy changes to enable improved management of the feral and domestic cats.

Legislative change is urgently required

Changes to legislation in NSW which allows local councils to manage domestic cats similarly to how domestic dogs are managed ie containment, registration and fines and enforcement for failure to do so.

This will require legislative amendments to the Local Government Act and the *Companion Animals Act 1998*. These changes should:

- Require domestic cat owners to register and microchip their domestic cat
- Require domestic cat owners to neuter their cats (with exemptions for registered breeders)
- Set limits on the number of cats a household may have on a property (with exemptions for registered breeders)
- Require 24 containment of domestic cats
- Allow council staff to trap roaming domestic cats and fine owners whose cats are found roaming

Initially the legislative changes should allow Councils to opt-in, in terms of adoption of the domestic cat management regime identified above with a phased implementation to allow councils to set up suitable systems and processes. However, ultimately the management of domestic cats as outlined above should be adopted by councils state-wide over a five to ten year period.

Establish funding support to local councils to enact improved domestic cat management

A 10 year, state-wide grant funding program to be established which provides grants to local councils and community organisations to undertake community education in terms of encouraging 24hr domestic cat containment, the provision by Council of subsidies to

domestic cat owners for providing domestic cat containment facilities in households, as well as subsidies for enrichment resources, and subsidies to households by Council for neutering of domestic cats. Grant funding should also be made available to Councils to enable them to put in place processes and systems enabling a transition into the domestic cat management regime as outlined in the proposed legislative amendments detailed above.

The grant program needs to be funded by the State government with assistance of the Commonwealth, and funding needs to be significant and meaningful.

Increase funding for the reduction of feral cat populations, through the use of humane lethal controls.

Feral cat reduction programs need to increase in number and be targeted to certain areas/habitats of threatened species which are most vulnerable to feral cat predation. This includes the use of poison baits and other delivery mechanisms where the baits lead to a humane and quick death. Fencing to exclude feral cats in areas of key habitat for all threatened species is not feasible, reasonable, sustainable or affordable.

The NSW Government also needs to support research and innovation into improved feral cat control measures through grants and other funding mechanisms.

I value the opportunity to discuss this submission with you. If you have any queries please contact me on president@bluemountains.org.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A. Cam', written in a cursive style.

Annette Cam
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