

Safe cat, safe wildlife: Fostering responsible pet ownership in New South Wales



Photo by Niels Klim

Recommendations in brief

- Amend the *NSW Companion Animals Act 1998* to enable local governments to enforce anti-roaming laws for pet cats at a local level.
- Allocate a minimum of \$9 million to fund compliance, education, desexing, identification and registration programs.
- Encourage local governments to develop companion animal management plans.
- Develop a state-wide web resource for pet owners.
- Streamline pet identification and registration processes.
- Make desexing mandatory state-wide.

The impact of roaming pet cats

Cats are both a valued companion animal and one of the world's most successful predators.

There are 4.9 million pet cats in Australia and rising.

Pet cats that are allowed to freely roam outside kill an estimated 390 million animals annually, the majority of which are native. This equates to an average of 186 animals killed each year per free-roaming, hunting pet cat¹.

Cats have strong natural hunting instincts; when given the opportunity, pet cats will hunt, regardless of whether they've been fed or not. The majority (up to 85%) of prey are not brought home¹.

More than 3 million Australians love or care for cats; almost a third of Australian households keep pet cats and research suggests that **the majority of cat owners (70%) allow their cats to freely roam** all or part of the day, although this level can vary greatly across jurisdictions¹.

¹ Legge, S, Woinarski, J CZ, Dickman, CR, Murphy BP, Woolley, LA & Calver, MC 2020, 'We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife', *Wildlife Research*, vol. 47, pp. 523-539.



GPS data reveals the secret life of pets. The map above shows the movements of Semi, a cat from Lithgow, who ventures into nearby bushland. Australian research using GPS-tracking collars from over 400 pet cats has shown that **pet cats roam as much as 30 hectares around their home base, although the average area a pet cat roams is 2 hectares.** Two hectares is equivalent to around 40 house yards! (Data: Roetman, P, Tingle, H, Litchfield, C, Chiera, B, Quinton, G, Kikillus, H et al. 2017, 'Cat tracker South Australia: understanding pet cats through citizen science', University of South Australia, Adelaide.)



Each year pet cats kill 80 million native birds, including rainbow lorikeets. Photo by Anna Tarazevich

Current constraints in NSW

The NSW *Companion Animals Act 1998* sets out the duties and responsibilities of pet owners. These are enforced at a local government level. However, the *Act* currently provides limited controls for the management of free-roaming pet cats by local government.

NSW local governments can prohibit the presence of cats in very specific circumstances, namely, prohibition from food and consumption areas and areas declared wildlife protection areas.

The *Act* does not allow local governments to regulate roaming cats generally. This presents a major challenge for increasing responsible pet ownership in the state.

Responsible pet ownership laws

The most effective solution to prevent pet cats preying on native animals is for owners to keep them indoors and only provide controlled access to the outdoors via a cat run, cat-proof fencing, a harness and leash or similar. This is often termed 'cat containment' or a '24/7 curfew'. This can also have significant benefits for pet cat health, through reduced risk of injury and disease. In fact, **pet cats that are responsibly kept at home can live up to 10 years longer than if they were free-roaming**².

Alternate solutions, such as predation-inhibiting devices offer a sub-optimal solution. For example, cat bibs, a collar-mounted pounce protector, only reduce predation success by 50%³.

In 2021 the NSW Environmental Trust invested \$2.4 million in a four-year project, 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home.' The project is being delivered by RSPCA NSW in close partnership with 11 local governments. The project starts to provide further resources and interventions to improve the way people care for their cats and increase the practice of cat containment through a behaviour change and education lens.

Social research has identified a desire by local governments for powers under the *Companion Animals Act 1998* to enforce cat containment to meet local needs, as an additional management strategy in the toolkit⁴.

'Cat containment' has been recommended or supported by a broad suite of organisations:

- **Local Government NSW (LGNSW)** has consistently identified the need for stronger legislation. Their current policy platform advocates for 'amendments to legislation to enable councils to more effectively manage the nuisance effects of cats on residents and wildlife, including... limiting the roaming of cats beyond their owner's property'.
- In 2021 the National Threatened Species Recovery Hub surveyed 240 local governments and recommended creating strong, enabling legislation for pet cat management that includes 'mandatory requirements to keep cats contained to the owner's property, or under equivalent control e.g. on a leash, or in a carrier) when off-property.'

2 RSPCA NSW, <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/keeping-cats-safe/cat-lovers-2>

3 Calver, M, Thomas, S, Bradley, S & McCutcheon, H 2007, 'Reducing the rate of predation on wildlife by pet cats: the efficacy and practicability of collar-mounted pounce protectors', *Science Direct*, vol. 137, pp. 341-348

4 Nou, T, Legge, S, Woinarski, J, Dielenberg, J & Garrard, G 2021, 'The management of cats by local governments of Australia', Threatened Species Recovery Hub, National Environmental Science Programme, Brisbane.

Case study:

What impact can a single cat have?

A single free-roaming cat can detrimentally affect sensitive species – not only through direct predation, but secondary effects. In Mandurah, Western Australia, one unregistered, desexed male cat entered a protected breeding colony of fairy terns. Over a period of three weeks, regular predation and disturbance by the cat caused the complete reproductive failure of all 111 nests; 6 adults and multiple chicks were directly killed and the remaining birds abandoned their nests. The presence of one cat meant the bird colony failed to produce a single chick that made it to the end of nesting season¹.



Roaming pet cat spotted at the fairy tern sanctuary. Photo by Claire Greenwell.

1 Greenwell, CN, Calver, MC & Loneragan, NR 2019, 'Cat gets its tern: a case study of predation on a threatened coastal seabird', *Animals*, vol. 8, pp. 445.

- In 2017-18 **RSPCA Australia** reviewed best practice cat management and identified 'education programs are needed to increase the acceptance and uptake of 24-hour cat containment, with subsequent regulation in areas of high conservation value.'
- The 2016 **NSW Natural Resources Commission (NRC)** state-wide review of pest animal management recommended the NSW Government 'revise the current regulatory arrangements to make the declaration and enforcement of cat containment areas by local government more effective'. The NRC recognised that reducing the threat cats pose to biodiversity requires the holistic management of both domestic and feral cats.



Each year pet cats kill 83 million native reptiles, including the blue-tongued skink.. Photo by MTSofan

Minor amendments to the *Companion Animals Act 1998* could create an enabling environment for local governments to enforce containment measures that meet their community's needs and expectations, and would complement the current 'Keeping Cats Safe at Home' project.

The success of mandatory cat containment will be dependent on active enforcement and public awareness of its requirement. The recommendations outlined below will ensure councils that opt-in to improve the management of pet cats in their area are better resourced to support compliance with the *Companion Animals Act 1998*.

Such laws would help shift the norms around how cats are cared for – encouraging owners to keep their pet cats safe, while preventing predation on wildlife. **Previous social research has found that a majority of Australians would support mandatory cat containment⁵.**

5 Toukhsati, SR, Young, E, Bennett, PC & Coleman, GJ 2012, 'Wandering cats: attitudes and behaviours towards cat containment in Australia', *Anthrozoos*, vol. 25, pp. 61-74.

A win for all: wildlife, cats and community

Cats can live up to 10 years longer when they aren't allowed to roam away from home.

All cat owners have a responsibility to their cat, their community and the environment.

Preventing pet cats from freely roaming not only helps reduce the impact on local biodiversity from hunting, but helps protect pets from contracting diseases, reduces their risk of becoming injured or killed through fighting and accidents, prevents accidental breeding, increases the opportunity for owner-animal interaction, minimises transmission of diseases like the zoonoses toxoplasmosis and reduces disturbance caused to neighbours by roaming pets¹.



1 RSPCA Australia, www.safeandhappycats.com.au



Sugar gliders are one of the native marsupials hunted by pet cats. Each year pet cats kill 67 million native mammals. Photo by Patrick Kavanagh

Aligning NSW with Australian standards

In response to the 2020 federal inquiry into the problem of feral and domestic cats, the Australian government recommended local governments actively consider 24/7 containment options.

NSW and WA are the only states in Australia that do not enable local governments to consider cat containment through the state legislation. For example, the respective companion animal management legislation in Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland and South Australia supports local governments to create locally-specific laws for pet containment.

There is no equivalent capacity in NSW legislation to enforce cat containment currently, however, minor amendments to the *Companion Animals Act 1998* could equip local governments with the necessary powers to consider cat containment at a local level.



More people are getting creative with cat enclosures. Photo by Re_vised CC BY-NC 2.0

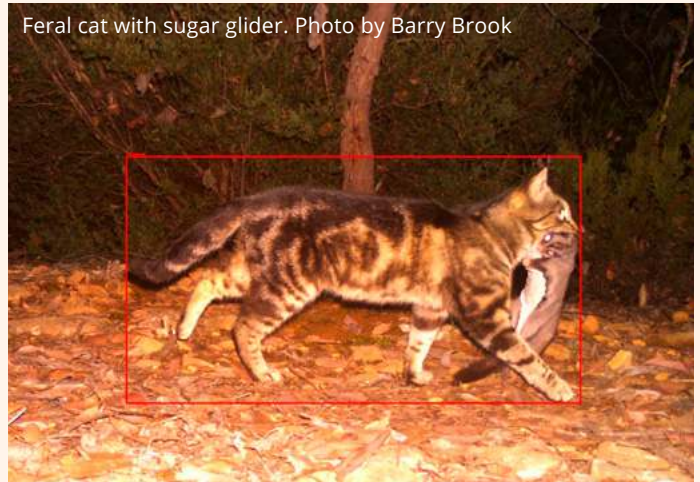
Recommendations

Legislative reform priorities

Amend the *Companion Animals Act 1998* to enable local governments to enforce the containment of pet cats at a local level:

- Amend the *Companion Animals Act 1998* and associated Companion Animals Regulation 2018 to allow local governments to declare entire jurisdiction, or any area within their jurisdiction, as a cat containment or curfew area for the purposes of preventing pet cats from roaming at large.
- Ensure local governments have the flexibility to introduce containment laws that meet the specific needs of their area and community, including phase-in periods, selection of which areas within their jurisdiction the policy applies and enabling community support and monitoring frameworks.

Feral cat with sugar glider. Photo by Barry Brook



Additional opportunities for the NSW Government to reduce wildlife predation by pet cats

1. Allocate funding to support local governments to enforce compliance with the *Companion Animals Act 1998*:

- Develop a three-year **\$9 million state-wide grant program** to support local government implementation of domestic **cat containment**, including through increasing the number of rangers and subsidies for cat enclosures.
- The fund should provide multi-year funding to local governments to support employment of staff to establish and implement cat containment Orders provided for under the proposed legislative amendments.

2. Increase investment in programs that support the responsible cat ownership measures of containment, desexing, identification and registration:

- Provide funding for councils to undertake large-scale desexing, microchipping and registration programs, and fund effective education programs to encourage people to keep cats indoors.
- Extend the Keeping Cats Safe at Home project which is due to conclude in 2024 and develop a strategy to expand the program across NSW's 128 local government areas via a prioritisation process based on key biodiversity values.
- Part of this process should involve developing guides for local governments and collating all materials developed as part of the Keeping Cats Safe at Home project into a centralised resource for re-use and easy distribution.

3. Encourage local governments to develop and implement companion animal management plans that address objectives, strategies, monitoring and evaluation.

4. Fund the development of a state-wide web resource for responsible pet ownership

- In partnership with the state's animal welfare bodies develop a central, state-wide web platform that makes responsible pet ownership information easily accessible.
- This should include a map and search function that makes it easy for residents to look up the local rules that apply to pet ownership in their area, similar to the ACT cat containment and dog exercise area map.

5. Streamline pet identification and registration processes.

- Streamline the pet identification and registration into one process, rather than two separate processes.
- Transfer the NSW Pet Registry to a database managed by Service NSW and improve service to owners of companion animals by establishing self-service functions via the Service NSW app.
- Require any animal sold or given away to be registered.

6. Transition to state-wide mandatory desexing laws

- Simplify the *Companion Animals Management Act 1998* to require pet cats to be desexed by four months of age, with limited exceptions for licenced breeders, to align with existing state approaches in Western Australia, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, and South Australia.
- Make it mandatory for animals rehomed or sold through council pounds or rehoming organisations to be desexed, unless there is a welfare or health reason not to.

Contact us
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or visit invasives.org.au



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