



27 July 2020

Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam,

WILDLIFE HEALTH AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO THE PROBLEM OF FERAL AND DOMESTIC CATS IN AUSTRALIA

Please find attached a submission regarding the problems associated with feral and domestic cats in Australia.

Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) welcomes the federal government's consideration of the impacts of feral and domestic cats on natural ecosystems in Australia.

We hope that this submission is of assistance. Wildlife Health Australia would be happy to discuss it further should you require additional information or clarification.

Yours Sincerely,

Rupert Woods AM
CEO, Wildlife Health Australia

WILDLIFE HEALTH AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO THE PROBLEM OF FERAL AND DOMESTIC CATS IN AUSTRALIA

Both feral and domestic cats have significant impacts on the Australian ecosystem. They cause problems at an individual level and at a population or ecosystem level.

Cats, both feral and domestic, in Australia, are a cause of problems because:

- they predate on Australian wildlife (all taxa – mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians - are affected by cat predation)
- predation effects may be direct (immediate death of the prey) or indirect (injury, wound trauma and infection; altered behaviour and physiological stress in prey species), which can lead to subsequent illhealth, reduced reproduction, infectious disease and death of the “prey” species)
- cats compete with native species for habitat, food, and other resources, leaving native species compromised
- cats are responsible for infectious diseases which can have population level, as well as individual impacts on native species, most noticeably the protozoan parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*¹
- The 1996 report “Overview of the Impacts of Feral Cats on Australian Native Fauna” (Dickman 1996) provides detailed information and recommendations on the likely impact of predation by feral cats in Australia.

We note that although the impacts of cats are not disputed, these impacts remain largely unquantified in the Australian context. We stress the importance of robust quantification of the impacts of cats: unless impacts are quantified, management actions cannot be assessed for efficacy, and inefficient and potentially ineffective management strategies may result, with impacts continuing unabated.

Australian marsupials are believed to be uniquely vulnerable to the disease impacts of toxoplasmosis, due to the lack of evolutionary exposure to the parasite. Toxoplasmosis (most often resulting in death) has been reported in a wide range of Australian native mammal species (see Portas 2010). Despite years of study, there remains a limited understanding of the quantified impacts of this disease on our native species in wild situations, although we know that this disease can have a significant impact on the success of endangered species recovery and translocation programs, if cats are present (e.g. Adriaanse 2018; Groenewegen et al. 2018; Taggart 2019). More work is urgently needed in this area, including long-term longitudinal studies of native species in both cat-free, and cat-infested habitats, and improvements in diagnostic testing for native species.

We note that both feral and domestic cats can have similar impacts on Australian ecosystems and species, however the best methods of mitigating these impacts may be quite different for the two types of cats. Feral cat impacts are primarily managed by cat control programs such as exclusion fencing or population management [culling] whereas domestic cat impacts are best managed by education, social engagement and informed behaviour change in cat owners. This may be assisted by

¹ See WHA Fact Sheet “Toxoplasmosis of Australian Mammals” www.wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/FactSheets.aspx for a summary of this disease in Australian wildlife

regulatory enforcement (e.g. local government area adoption of regulations that assist in pet cat control, such as registration, identification, desexing and indoor housing requirements).

We recommend that the following priorities be considered, and supported by adequate funding and resources:

- Development of robust tools for accurate estimation numbers of cats, and thereby impacts of cats on native species, which will allow monitoring and assessment of effectiveness of any methods employed to lessen these impacts
- Continued support for research and management work into disease impacts of cats on native species
- Ongoing investigation of practical and humane methods to reduce feral cat numbers
- Ongoing and expanded support for construction and maintenance of predator-proof enclosures
- Programs that provide tools for advocacy and human behaviour change with respect to ownership and management of pet cats. For example, we strongly support the efforts of Australian zoos and their colleagues in their community engagement work in this area (e.g. “Safe cat, safe wildlife, www.safecat.org.au/about-us.html). Australian zoos receive 20 million visitors a year and are uniquely placed to provide information and engagement on issue such as best practice for managing pet cats in the Australian setting.

References

Adriaanse K (2018) Investigation of the risk of *Toxoplasma gondii* to the establishment of the ‘extinct in the wild’ eastern barred bandicoot (*Perameles gunnii*) on Phillip Island. MVSc thesis, University of Melbourne.

Dickman CR (1996) 'Overview of the impacts of feral cats on Australian native fauna.' (Australian Nature Conservation Agency Canberra:

Groenewegen R, Harley D, Hill R, Coulson G (2018) Assisted colonisation trial of the eastern barred bandicoot (*Perameles gunnii*) to a fox-free island. *Wildlife Research* **44**, 484-496.

Portas TJ (2010) Toxoplasmosis in macropodids: a review. *Journal of Zoo and Wildlife Medicine* **41**, 1-6.

Taggart PL (2019) Ecology of Cat-borne Parasitoses in Australia. PhD thesis, University of Adelaide.

ABOUT WILDLIFE HEALTH AUSTRALIA

Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) is the coordinating body for wildlife health in Australia and operates nationally. The head office is located in Sydney, NSW.

WHA activities focus on the increasing risk of emergency and emerging diseases that can spill over from wild animals and impact on Australia's trade, human health, biodiversity and tourism. We provide a framework that allows Australia to better identify, assess, articulate and manage these risks. We provide the framework for Australia's general wildlife health surveillance system.

Our mission is to develop strong partnerships in order to better manage the adverse effects of wildlife diseases on Australia's animal health industries, human health, biodiversity, trade and tourism.

WHA directly supports the Animal Health Committee (AHC), Environment and Invasives Committee (EIC), Animal Health Australia, the Animal Health Policy Branch and the Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer (OCVO) and Chief Environmental Biosecurity Officer (CEBO) within the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) and Australian governments in their efforts to better prepare and protect Australia against the adverse effects of wildlife diseases. It provides priorities in wildlife disease work, administers Australia's general wildlife disease surveillance system as well as facilitating and coordinating targeted projects. Wildlife health intelligence collected through the National Wildlife Health Information System (eWHIS: www.wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au) administered by WHA is provided to members of AHC and the Australian Government DAWE, and Department of Health, on issues of potential national interest, potential emerging issues and significant disease outbreaks in wildlife. The information is provided in line with the agreed policy for data security. WHA supports the National Animal Health Information System (NAHIS) by provision of quarterly reporting and Australia's Chief Veterinary Officer by hosting the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) Focal Point for Wildlife. WHA also provides Australia's representative to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission Wildlife Health Specialist Group (IUCN SSC WHSG).

WHA is administered under good corporate governance principles. An elected management group, chaired by an appointment from DAWE, and including an AHC representative provides strategic direction and advice to a small team, which oversees the running of WHA. It is important to note that WHA involves almost every agency or organisation (both government and NGO) that has a stake or interest in animal and wildlife health issues in Australia. There are over 40 member organisations and more than 750 wildlife health professionals and others from around Australia and the rest of the world who have an interest in diseases with feral animals or wildlife as part of their ecology that may impact on Australia's trade, human health and biodiversity.

More information on WHA is available at: www.wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au.