



Proposed amendments to the
Dog and Cat Management Act
to improve cat management
South Australian

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. The AVA consists of members who come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

AVA Statement of principles with respect to Animal Welfare¹

Animals are sentient beings that are conscious, feel pain, and experience emotions. Animals and people have established relationships for mutual benefit for thousands of years.

Humans have a duty of care to protect animals. Where a person does not meet his or her obligations to animals in his or her care, animals may suffer. When this happens, the law must be able to adequately intervene to enforce compliance and prevent suffering.

Animals have intrinsic value and should be treated humanely by the people who benefit from them. Owned animals should be safe from physical and psychological harm. They need access to water and species-appropriate food and shelter and should be able to fulfil their important behavioural and social needs. They must receive prompt veterinary care when required and have as painless and stress-free a death as possible.

Animals can be used to benefit humans if they are humanely treated, but the benefit to people should be balanced against the cost to the animal. They should not be used in direct combat or for purposes where suffering, injury or distress is likely to be caused.

Humans should strive to provide positive experiences to promote a life worth living for the animals in their care. We should strive for continuous and incremental improvement in the treatment and welfare of animals.

Humans have a responsibility to care for the natural environment of free-living native animals. People should take steps to preserve endangered species and protect native animals from disease where possible.

Recommendation

- That changes to the legislation regarding cat management be paused and a comprehensive State Cat Management Strategy be developed.
- That this strategy then inform required amendments to the legislation.

¹ <https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/animal-welfare-principles-and-philosophy/ava-statement-of-principles--animal-ethics/>



Discussion

Cats are intelligent, sentient animals that play a significant role in Australian society. Cats form bonds with people and provide companionship and enjoyment. Studies have shown that relationships with animals are positive and important to many people, contributing to health and well-being. In the Animal Medicines Australia's Pets in Australia report, cats continued to be Australia's second most popular pet, with a third of all households housing at least one feline friend (33%, up from 27% in 2019).

Cat ownership is an integral part of the human- animal bond and plays an important and positive role in the health and wellbeing of the community. Benefits can include companionship, health and social improvements and assistance for people with special needs.

However, feral cats have a significant impact on our environment. Invasive species, ecosystem modification and agriculture in Australia are noted as the key threats impacting on many threatened species.² Worldwide, cats, dogs and rodents are the most damaging invasive mammalian predators. In Australia, introduced species including rabbits, cats and foxes, affect 267 of Australia's 1257 threatened species as listed in the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act). Feral cats are known to threaten 123 of these listed species. Feral cats are likely to have been a major cause in 57% of Australia's 47 extinctions of reptiles, birds and mammals since European settlement, and that trend continues unabated.³⁴ Cats also impact on human health and animal production through the transmission of zoonotic disease.

The untoward effects of cats on wildlife and transmission of zoonoses are unlikely to be eliminated using current methods, but they can be reduced and managed using humane, long-term strategies which reflect a balanced whole-of-community approach.

While it is easy to categorise cats as either owned or feral, this is not helpful with respect to the management of cats. The AVA is concerned that the proposed changes to the Bill set up this binary categorisation of cats.

Instead, the definition should reflect the different human-animal relationships associated with different categories of cats. This is reflected below as:

- Domestic - cats with some dependence on people (direct or indirect) living in the vicinity of where people live or frequent, including around farm buildings, and are subcategorised as owned, semi-owned and unowned
 - Owned - These are cats who live in a domestic household, are usually named, have a form of identification and depend on humans for their food.
 - Semi-owned – These cats are variably dependent on humans for food and shelter and are more abundant in areas where food resources are available.
 - Unowned – These cats are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally, such as via food waste bins. They are more abundant in

² Kearney SG, Carwardine J, Reside AE et al (2019) "Corrigendum: The threats to Australia's imperilled species and implications for a National Conservation Response." Pacific Conservation Biology. CSIRO. <https://doi.org/10.1071/PC18024>.

³ Legge S, Woisanski J, Dickman C et al (2020) We need to worry about Bella and Charlie: the impacts of pet cats on Australian wildlife. Wildlife Research <https://doi.org/10.1071/WR19174>

⁴ Woolley LA, Geyle HM, Murphy BP et al (2019) Introduced cats (*Felis catus*) eating a continental fauna: inventory and traits of Australian mammal species killed. Mammal Review. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mam.12167>



areas where food resources are available. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.

- Feral – These cats live independently of humans, tend to be solitary and their territory can be large and variable, depending on resources.

Although these populations overlap to varying extents, they each require a different management strategy. There is very little evidence that supports restricting the definition to only pet and feral cat as the existing scientific literature indicates that domestic cat management including unowned and semi-owned cats requires an evidence based strategic collaborative approach. Labelling these populations as 'feral' will subject them to being declared as a pest in relevant jurisdictions, which would encourage and condone killing as the only management method, as these cats could not legally be rehomed. This would create confusion and significant concern amongst the community, thereby risking social license for all cat management activities. The importance of developing a solid, universal definition about what a feral cat is, as opposed to a stray cat has been highlighted by Deak et al (2019). Dubois et al (2017) also acknowledges the risks of labelling species as pests in a generic sense rather than focusing on developing strategic, location specific action plans.

Cat Management Strategy

The development of a cat management strategy needs to recognise this and map out appropriate management strategies for the various populations. The management strategies need to be science-based, as does its language. Importantly, the strategy also needs to be clear about lines of responsibility for the management. As veterinary care providers, veterinary practices are often caught financially caring for the welfare of animals that no one is taking responsibility for. The majority of veterinary practices are private small businesses who receive no government funding. While they are the professionals with the expertise to care for hurt animals, they are not capable of funding this, nor should they be expected to. For this reason, the AVA does support amendment to section 64(2)(a) of the Act to remove veterinary surgeon from the list of locations a person can take an unidentified cat to. Stray cats should only be brought to a veterinary practice if there is a formal agreement between the practice and the body responsible for the cat - ideally the local or state government. This formal agreement should include a mechanism for financially compensating the veterinary practice.

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